

A

STRANGER

THINGS
CHRISTMAS

WRITTEN BY JAMISON COOPER

A Stranger Things Christmas by TheMobRapper

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Summary: Following the events of season 2, Hopper realizes that Eleven knows little about the biggest holiday of the year: Christmas. He's desperate to give her a good Christmas, but her security must come first. Can he get past himself and his doubts to keep his new daughter happy and safe?

1. Chapter 1

Hello, everybody! It is good to be back! So when the second season of Stranger Things was released in October, my family and I started watching the full thing. It's safe to say that I sold my soul to the Upside-Down. I love every one of those characters to pieces, they're all so unique! So yes, Stranger Things is my life now. Haters can hate (those mouthbreathers). Seriously though, that insult needs to become a thing. ANYWAY. I wasn't all that keen on writing fanfiction on the show yet for the simple fact that we still have a lot to learn about the characters, and I would've preferred to wait until the end of the show (yeah, the like, 4-5 years) to start writing with a full knowledge of the show. However, both seasons never showed us something that I was DYING to see: El's Christmas! So I figured, hey. The Duffer Bros missed their chance twice. Maybe they'll redeem themselves in Season 3, maybe not. But for now, with Christmas approaching fast, I'll do the job for them. Now, onto the first chapter of my first Stranger Things story!

****IN THIS STORY, THE SNOWBALL WAS HELD IN EARLY DECEMBER, AS TO COMFORTABLY ACCOMMODATE CERTAIN EVENTS THAT OCCUR IN THIS STORY****

It was a peaceful winter morning, in the earlier part of December. The urban parts of Hawkins, Indiana were painted with snow, and the mountains and rural outskirts of the town were layered feet deep in it. The sun had already begun its venture upwards towards the center of the sky, though it seemed to give little resistance against the freezing cold temperatures resting over Hawkins. It smelled of fresh powdered snow, a sharp musty-moist smell that, mixed with the low temperature, made one's nose burn. Christmas was in the air, further advertised by the lights and decorations resting on many of the Hawkins residents' homes and stores full of holiday wares.

The schools' winter breaks had begun a week early due to more snow than anticipated, and the only two snow movers in the town, old decrepit machines, were in no such shape to clear the thick streets.

Because of this, children had already taken over the frozen streets, despite the early hours they usually dreaded. Snowmen, snow angels, snowball fights — it was a pure winter wonderland, both for the children and the adults, most of whom were taking the rare opportunity to sleep late underneath heated blankets. Even those who grumpily had gotten out of bed with the sun couldn't help but smile at the sight of the overjoyed children taking advantage of the seasonal delightment.

Far out in the barren, snow-coated forests of Hawkins rested a small wooden cabin, its roof slightly bending beneath the weight of the thick powder atop it. The planks that made up the exterior of the cabin were grayed from old age mixed with the years of harsh weather conditions they had endured. They still held strong, though, and the strange coloring gave the little home an eerie-yet-rustic appearance. Old Adirondack chairs furnished the porch; cigarette butts and brown leaves coated the plank flooring. The cabin consisted of few windows, meant to retain more warmth when it was built decades before, but there were enough panes of glass to offer plentiful light and view.

The interior of the cabin, however, was a stark contrast to its dreary exterior appearance. While most of the furnishings were at least ten years old, it still felt homely and pleasant. Framed pictures adorned nearly every wall; some were Polaroids of family, most were paintings of nature. Lamps with carved wooden stands rested upon cedar coffee tables, offering a warm ambiance. Books lined several bookshelves as well as wall-mounted shelves, creating a small library of scrapbooks, guides, atlases, western novels, encyclopedias, and everything between. No curtains hung over the windows, but instead patterned cloths rested over them, some pulled away to allow the natural light inside.

Resting against the back wall of the family room and directly opposite an old matching sofa and chair sat a television, several years old. It wasn't in the greatest condition, like most everything in the cabin, but it had a color display, and it worked fine—most of the time. The little television was playing an episode of a black and white western, but it was being utterly ignored by the holey sofa's snoring occupant. The man, somewhere in his forties, wore nothing but a

torn, stained undershirt and a set of boxers that hadn't been washed in four days. He reeked of cheap liquor, and several empty bottles of generic beer littered the floor around him. A number of empty candy wrappings were strewn about the cabin, marking the path the sleeping man had wandered before his eventual collapse. To top the scene off, a half-empty bottle of pain medication was clenched tightly in the man's left hand.

The sun's subdued rays eventually began to beam strategically into the man's face, causing a pleasant warmth and an unwelcome awakening. He groaned and attempted to roll away from the light, but the tiny sofa didn't offer that much room and he fell to the cluttered floor, miraculously avoiding all of the glass bottles. For several moments he laid there, blinking his tired eyes and recalling his last memories.

Late at night. Stress. Relentless flashes of red and blue. Gunshots.

Death.

At last he let out another groan and slowly pushed himself to his knees with the help of the sofa and looked around, slowly taking in the pigsty that surrounded him. And then it all finally came back to him. The situation from the night before that had kept him and over half of the Hawkins Police Department up until nearly three in the morning. It was finally over, but it hasn't ended well. It never ended well when an innocent life was lost. Especially when it was a kid that got caught up in it all.

At last, Hawkins Chief of Police Jim Hopper rose groggily to his feet and glanced blearily at the wall-mounted clock. Just after 8:15, which meant—unsurprisingly, to Hopper—that he'd only gotten a few hours of sleep, and most certainly not enough. Ah, well. At least he had the full day off, unless something urgent came up or someone asked for him specifically. Luckily he'd been able to make it home before collapsing with his booze and meds, instead of on the dirt road that led up to the decrepit cabin. A major relief, for he'd been in such a state of shock and exhaustion that he hadn't been sure if he'd be able to make the drive home or not.

Roughly shaking his head to clear it from both the grogginess and the

trauma, he made his way to the small bathroom. It was nice enough, having been renovated only two months ago by him and his newly-adopted daughter Jane, or, as she often went by, El. It had been an . . . interesting project, for sure, but it had also been quite enjoyable. The kid could always get him to smile, though it wasn't always on purpose.

Now Hopper stood behind the stone counter, bracing himself with both arms while he examined his face. His hair was greasy, and in dire need of a washing and combing. Dirt clung to every bit of exposed skin, glued on by stale sweat. Mud was caked between his fingernails, most of which were uneven and cracked. He desperately needed a shower, he thought as he frowned at his reflection's bloodshot eyes, accented by the dark bags hanging beneath them. With no better ideas in his head, Hopper stumbled into his bedroom and selected a pair of shorts and a gray polo to wear. He then went back to the bathroom, frustratedly cleared away the makeup supplies cluttering the countertop, and cranked up the shower's water temperature.

Jeez Louise, that's just what I needed, he thought absentmindedly a few seconds after his bare skin adjusted to the heat of the water. Technically he was required to return to the police station first thing after an event to document a crime that had occurred, but the officers had grown to never expect the chief for at least a day after a big crime, usually longer if one of Hawkins' residents were harmed. It was just part of his mourning ritual: sleeping late after staying up even later, drinking booze, and popping his pain meds. That was the important stuff, and the important stuff came first; always, no exceptions.

Twenty minutes later he padded into the kitchen in his holey-yet-clean socks and got a pot of coffee brewing. Then, noticing his growling stomach for the first time in nearly twenty-four hours, he went in search of breakfast food. The dozen boxes of Eggos taking up the entire freezer were off-limits, mostly reserved for El or the rare occasion they sounded appealing to Hopper. He began to reach for the bag of mini donuts in the cupboard, but paused and glanced down at his slightly-bulging belly. Reminded of his secretary's daily nagging to take better care of himself, he opened the fridge and, after

a few moments, began pulling out eggs, mushrooms, spinach, shredded cheese, and various other ingredients. Over a medium bowl he cracked nearly a dozen eggs, then whisked in the other items and poured the mixture into a baking pan. He then topped it with cheese and set the concoction into the oven that had been preheating for the past few minutes.

It felt good to cook. It took his mind off of everything else, though of course, it had been only a short distraction. To kill time he wandered around the living room, tidying up his mess as not to cause El to worry. Hopper wasn't sure how much she knew about his bad habits, but he felt better keeping them under wraps. She didn't need any more stress in her childhood, like her biological father Dr. Brenner had caused. It always disturbed Hopper to think about the man, and it disturbed him even then as he gathered the bottles and garbage from the floor. It was both relieving and unnerving, being unsure of Dr. Brenner's whereabouts. Most people doubted he was still in Hawkins, considering he hadn't been spotted by anyone for months, despite the town's urgency they placed upon finding him.

Hopper shivered. Then he realized he already had been shivering. It was freezing inside the cabin, probably in the low fifties. Thinking of how cold El probably was he hurried over to the thermostat and cranked it up to 85. Call him overly protective, but the poor kid grew to be quite miserable when she was down with a cold, like she had been the past half-dozen times in the three preceding months. She hardly knew what to do with herself, being tired and weak all the time and dealing with an aching head and sinus. Hopper always felt so miserable for her.

After checking on the breakfast baking in the oven, Hopper noticed that the cabin was unusually bright, more so than on usual December mornings. Typically it was as dark as dawn, but today it was almost bright enough to pass for a spring afternoon. Curious, he approached the main window and pulled the curtains open. He discovered that, remarkably, it was a gorgeous day out in the forest, quite unlike the gray, depressing nature of a usual snow day. Strange. He hadn't seen a pretty winter day in years, despite his entire life spent in the little town. He approached the front door and opened it, slipping on his boots and stepping outside to admire the beautiful scenery

surrounding his home. Obviously it was freezing, but it was almost pleasant to stand in the rays of the December sun, allowing the warmth of it to—

Slam.

The cabin's front door slammed shut with an incredible force. Hopper stared at it in shock from his position several yards away from the old wooden door. There was little wind, and it was on an even surface, so what could have caused it to shut itself so harshly? Suddenly he had a good idea of what was going on. Grinning, he pushed his way through the snow back to the porch, stomped the snow from his boots, and opened the door again. Less than ten seconds later it quickly shut again, this time at such a speed it made every window on the same wall quiver.

Hopper removed his boots and went back inside, angling himself towards El's bedroom. The door was wide open and the light was on, as it usually was at night. El couldn't stand it if her door was closed for a long period of time, especially in the dark. Hopper assumed her fear came from the laboratory in which she'd been raised, considering how deathly paranoid she became if either her light or door weren't as she preferred.

He knocked on the bedroom door in a strategic pattern of short and long knocks. "Hey, kid. Rise and shine." He waited for a response from the mass underneath the thick comforter blanket that rested atop the steel-framed twin bed. "Come on, wakey wakey. It's past eight-thirty." This only managed to elicit a slurred grumble. Usually El got up at sunrise, sometimes even before then—unless she had stayed up later than allowed, reading or doodling on a sketch pad she'd gotten from Mike Wheeler. In such instances, Hopper showed little mercy. "Hey, El," he enticed in a slightly sarcastic tone. "You oughta look out the window. It's a snow day . . ."

The thirteen-year-old let out a loud sigh and threw the thick blanket over her head. Hopper chuckled to himself. El hated snow, most likely because she'd endured through it all on her own for several months the year before. On the run from Hawkins Lab, the police, and goodness knows who or what else, she'd spent part of autumn and most of winter alone in the forest, until she'd been found and

taken in by Hopper. It was a little weird, seeing her disgust towards the snow while most every other child in Indiana practically prayed for it all year long. It was sure humorous, though, no doubt about it.

"Oh well, I guess I'll just have to eat this special breakfast I made all by myself, while I watch cartoons." The police chief winced as he heard the pain he was hiding start to splinter through the mask. Dear goodness gracious, how he hoped he wouldn't spontaneously break down crying, as he'd known himself to do on the rare occasion of extreme anxiety. Fortunately El didn't seem to notice in her sleepy state. All she did was mutter under her breath and toss and turn underneath the sheets. Time to break out the big guns. "I suppose I'll just crack into that stash of Eggos, then."

Finally he heard the deep sigh of resignation, and he pulled the door closed most of the way to give the girl some privacy. She didn't seem to understand the importance of changing clothes in the bathroom no matter how much Hopper tried to explain, so they'd settled for changing behind a mostly-closed door. It was those little victories that made him feel like he was doing a semi-decent job of parenting. However, he never felt like he knew her well enough to be able to make decisions and rules based around her personality. He never knew how much slack he should give her, or where he should draw the line—especially considering how differently she'd been raised than normal children. Did other parents with adopted older kids ever feel that way, uncertain where boundaries should be set and what privileges should be allowed? It was a mental battle where Hopper never knew which side to take.

While he waited for El, he went back into the living room and made sure he'd cleaned up all of last night's mess. Satisfied, he stepped inside the kitchen to find plates and cutlery for breakfast, setting them on the creaky table that rested against the wall. It was small, but it perfectly accommodated two—all that they needed.

El dragged herself into the room just as Hopper was pulling breakfast from the oven. He glanced over his shoulder. "Look who actually managed to get herself out of bed," he greeted.

He received a dirty look in return, though curiosity quickly overcame El's annoyance. "What's that?" she sleepily inquired. She'd picked

jeans and a male's white tee-shirt that went halfway down to her knees and bore a fast food logo on the front. Her hair made it obvious she'd just awoken.

"This," Hopper explained, pulling a knife from the drawer, "is quiche."

"Queesh?"

"Quiche. It's kinda like a pie but without the crust, and instead of filling there's eggs and cheese and stuff." He began to cut the quiche into slices. "It's good."

El pondered this. "Egg . . . pie? Yuck."

Hopper snorted. Kids. "It doesn't actually taste like pie. It tastes like—like an omelette. Think of it like it's a giant omelette. Trust me, you'll like it."

He crossed over to the table and set a slice on both plates, then set the dish in the center of the table. Finally he took a few napkins from the counter and sat down in his usual seat. He looked expectantly at El, who finally relented and sat down across from him. She picked up her fork and poked the yellow-and-green slice. Despite the slightly disgusted face she made, she did eventually take a tiny bite. She slowly chewed, then cut a bigger piece with her fork and stuck it in her mouth. It wasn't long before she was shovelling the quiche down and going for seconds.

Hopper watched amusedly, and then finally asked the question he'd been waiting to ask for half an hour. "I guess you like it, then?" El nodded, too busy chowing down on a third piece. "You want to know what that green stuff is?" There was no response this time, only a quick meeting of the eyes. Hopper grinned. "It's spinach."

Right away El spat the chewed substance out, fortunately landing it all on the plate. "Spinach?" A horrified look came across her face.

"Spinach," Hopper confirmed. Every kid had a food they resented with all their soul. It was the one food they would avoid under any circumstance, even pass up dessert for. In El's case, that food was spinach. She liked salad, coleslaw, carrots; she didn't even mind peas

or broccoli. But spinach was an absolute no-no.

El sat back in her chair, looking defeated. For a few moments Hopper thought he had her, but she shocked him when she suddenly began eating the quiche again.

"So what's this? You like spinach now?"

El shook her head, picking out a mushroom. "Still hate spinach. I just like quiche."

Hopper thought that was a darn good comeback. And, now he had a way to get her to eat spinach. It made him wonder if she would fall for broccoli-laced brownies . . .

Author's Note:

There it is! The first chapter, finally complete! I'm having a total blast writing this story, let me just say. These characters, as difficult as they are for me to expand upon, are my new babies. Move over, Harrington, those kids are MINE. Now, I want to apologize for two things: first, this chapter isn't all that Christmasy, I know. I just had to build some background up, introduce the center of the story (El's and Hopper's relationship), that stuff. Next chapter, which is due in Tuesday, is way more Christmas-themes, I promise. Second thing, I only got to actually writing this story a few days ago, because of school and trying to plan out the story when I had no real idea as to what I wanted to do with it, and a few other things that stole some precious time away from me. So I'm sorry if anything feels a little rushed, I'm just trying to get this finished before Christmas! I personally feel like I wrote the characters well, they act pretty canon in my opinion. Let me know what you guys think! And if any of you have any great Stranger Things story ideas, let me hear them! If I hear something that sounds really good, then I might just write it. If not, it'll probably be awhile until I write another Stranger Things story. A few other stories are in progress, but they're obviously on hold for now, and it'll take awhile with school and work (when I get a job again). I hope you all enjoyed this story, and I'll be back real soon! Tuesday! Mark it on your calendars,

'cause it's happening, baby!

2. Chapter 2

Hey everyone! I'm back with Chapter 2, a longer chapter! This one is much more Christmas-y, so yeah, that's good. About time I fit the theme of the story. It gets a bit feely, too, so be warned. Thank you all so much for the amazing reception! Several favorites and follows, even a review! Thank you very much for that, blindredehyes, and I am here to answer your request for another chapter. Hope you all enjoy!

After breakfast, Hopper and El went to perform their morning duties: El cleared the table, then went to shower and tidy herself up while Hopper did the dishes and cleaned the table. Then Hopper tended to his bathroom responsibilities and El cleaned her room simultaneously. They always timed themselves specifically so that one never had to wait on the other. It was their morning routine, the one consistency in their lives. And while it didn't particularly seem like a bonding activity, both father and daughter seemed to grow closer with every routine. Hopper was especially proud of El, seeing as she began to really put forth an effort to be a good housemate. Sometimes Hopper even came home to find her dusting or mopping or scrubbing or tending to some other menial task. He always expressed his thankfulness, but inside he was overjoyed. Quite often he had felt afraid El would have difficulty adapting to a normal lifestyle, and he hadn't expected her to go beyond the duties given to her. It was utterly relieving.

The next few hours of the day passed uneventfully. The two took care of a few chores around the cabin, but there was relatively little to do, and they had taken care of everything by noon. Hopper then taught El how to prepare a platter of nachos for lunch. It was a simple meal, and El needed little instruction, aside from the restrictions on cheese dosage. When the tray finally entered the oven, it was weighed down with more than a half a pound of cheese. Not necessarily a bad thing, in Hopper's opinion; it just made the meal more costly than he would've preferred.

A few minutes later the nachos were cooked perfectly, and they were

served up and taken to the living room to be enjoyed in front of the television. Both having different tastes in genre, it took some time to select a channel, but they finally settled on an old action/romance movie. Being a more adult-themed movie, El wasn't particularly engrossed. When a particular scene came on Hopper turned his attention to El and was going to remark on the movie, but he noticed that she appeared to be in deep thought.

"Something on your mind, kid?" he asked.

For a few seconds El didn't appear to register the question, and Hopper was about to repeat himself when she turned to face him, a puzzled expression on her face. "Do you do Christmas?"

The unexpected question took Hopper off-guard. "What, you mean, like, celebrate it?" A short nod. "Yeah, I mean, I never met someone who didn't. Why?"

"Can we decorate, then?" She gestured broadly around the room. "Make it look like Christmas?"

Suddenly Hopper realized this would be her first real Christmas, the first Christmas she would celebrate rather than be tested through. He needed to make an impact on her current, minimal idea of what Christmas was, as to show her what the concept of Christmas really was and how important it was. "I don't see why not. Do you have anything specific in mind?" It made him wonder how much she really knew about the major holiday.

El frowned. "The lights like Ms. Byer had? And the stockings? And make presents for each other, and Mike and Will and everyone?" She closed her eyes. "Could we get a Christmas tree?"

"I think we could probably get most of that stuff. I can, uh . . ." He rubbed his hands together. It would certainly make a dent in his bank account, getting all this Christmas supplies. He'd have to limit his drinking for the next month. "I'll stop by the general store tomorrow after work. They have all sorts of Christmas stuff there."

Hopefully everything wouldn't be too expensive. He was anxious to give her a good first Christmas, so with luck, things would be going

down in price rather than up. He could probably drop by Joyce Byers' place and see if she had any extra lights from the year before. And a tree would be no financial hardship; they were surrounded by suitable trees just waiting to be cut down. Then pop some popcorn and dig around in the storage space under the floor, and decorations would be nearly complete. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. And either way, El couldn't really judge the final product, considering she didn't have much Christmas experience. That made things a little easier.

Hopper sniffed. "You'll have to make a Christmas list for me. Maybe get it done tomorrow while I'm at work, you hear?" El's confused expression reminded Hopper that she was completely oblivious to the stereotypical Christmas traditions and activities. "Uh, it's just a list of all the stuff you want. So I can have an idea of what present I should get you."

"I want Eggos."

He bit back a laugh. "That goes unsaid. I mean like, uh, you know. Toys and stuff. Entertainment things. Stuff you could use to keep yourself busy while I'm out. You know?"

El slowly nodded. "Write it down?"

Hopper nodded.

"Do you have a Christmas list?"

The question came right out of blue. "Uh, I—no, I don't. Lists are just, you know, for kids. Not adults."

That didn't make any sense in El's mind. It didn't seem like a mere list should be labeled a childish task. "Then how do I know what to get you?"

"I don't want anything." Hopper winced. Why did that come out sounding so harsh? *Get a grip, Jim*. "I've already got everything I need. Now start thinking about stuff to put on that list. I'm gonna get some more nachos." He started to get up, but stopped when he heard El's voice. She spoke in a very quiet tone, and if it hadn't been for the

utter silence all around them, he wouldn't have heard her murmur his name.

He rotated his head to meet her gaze. "Uh, yeah?"

El gave him a small smile, one that spoke more than the few words she offered. "Thank you."

The next day, Hopper was leaving the scene of a callout when he remembered his conversation with El the day before, and, seeing that it was high time for his lunch break, decided he'd swing by Melvald's General Store. Then he could ask Joyce if she had any spare Christmas décor he could borrow while he was there. He swung through the dusty streets, resisting the urge to pull over nearly every driver going exactly the speed limit because of the police truck in their rearview mirrors. Idiots.

When he finally approached the storefront, he was surprised to see the activity occurring in front of the store and the sidewalks around it. Everyone was getting prepared for the holidays, and even from his truck a hundred feet from the shop, he could see people bustling about inside through the windows. Somehow he knew this wouldn't be a simple in-and-out trip, but he had made a promise; one that he intended to keep. He began to slowly drive around the block, searching for a parking spot close to the front, but having to settle for the parking lot of a gas station a half-mile away. It wasn't all that far of a distance, but it looked like a million miles to the aging chief. Ah, well. It's good to exercise, he told himself as he began his trek.

The walk to the store was quite short, thankfully, but somehow the journey from the general store's front door to the register took almost double that amount of time. He felt so out of place amidst the crowd of disgruntled shoppers waiting to pay and go home. Of course, many of the shoppers muttered and complained to themselves when the chief bypassed the massive line and went straight to the registers, but nobody did much more than that. One of the perks of being the chief.

As he usually was, Donald Melvald, the store's kind-hearted owner was running one of the cashier positions. In his early seventies, the man believed that despite his title, he was entitled to the same work his employees engaged in, especially in the demanding holiday

atmosphere. When he wasn't busy with taking inventory or paying taxes the man was always either up front or stocking shelves, and was there every day, all day—no exceptions. Hopper liked him because he was always respectful and patient, making him easy to work with during shoplifting cases and compliant to a fault when it came to other police investigations. Melvald's father had been a sergeant several decades before, which is how he'd developed such a respect for the law, as he claimed.

Melvald had just handed a customer his change and wished him a merry Christmas when he noticed Hopper standing off to the side of the line. "Chief Hopper, good afternoon to you."

Hopper smiled politely and tipped his hat. "Yeah, thanks. Uh, is Joyce here today?"

"She will be, just not yet," he said with an apologetic smile. "She's working the evening shift today. Here, step into my office, we can talk in there."

"Oh, no, I just came to pick up some, ah, Christmas decorations."

The older man lifted a brow. "Decorations, hmm? So you're finally getting into the holiday spirit, then?" He chuckled.

Thinking about his actual incentive to get festive, Hopper decided the man's query was spot-on. "Yeah, you could say that. Just need some of your cheaper stuff, you know. Uh, ornaments for a tree, stuff to put on the walls, so on. Got anything that'll fit my salary?"

Melvald laughed, causing a few grumpy customers to start. "Yes, I hear you. In the back is my assortment of items that were returned, and a lot of it is still in all right shape. I'll let you pick through there, take what you want. You know where to go?"

"Don, I gotta pay you something. It's crazy this time of year; you'll need a little compensation."

He waved his hand carelessly. "There isn't much to be made from used condition goods, Chief. Tell you what; I'll sell whatever you pick for fifty percent the original price tag."

"Sounds like a bargain," Hopper cracked. It was strange, how generous the man was being. It wasn't unlike him to show the caring side of his heart, but to be this helpful? Hopper's intuition said something was up. He began to walk backward, out of the way of the line of antsy customers. "I really appreciate this, Donald."

Melvald waved his hand again and, with a final smile, he turned back to work the register. Hopper strolled along the walls of the store, searching for the back room. He quickly came to the metal door with a sign that read *EMPLOYEES ONLY*, which he pulled open and stepped through. The back room turned out to be a cramped room about the size of a master bedroom, with boxes organized neatly on the shelves that lined the walls and stretched across the floors. It only took a moment for him to discover a large cart full of objects. The majority of the goods were Christmas-themed, of course, and most seemed to be in good shape, aside from the creased and bent packaging. There were Christmas towns, snow globes, sweaters, ornaments, socks, rolls of wrapping paper, mugs, and everything else one could possibly need. After an entertaining ten minutes of digging, he gave his findings a final look-over. He'd found a few humorous wall hangings, an artificial wreath that smelled of cinnamon, a ceramic nativity scene that was only missing a few animals, two red stockings with white fur around their tops, and a few items to decorate a Christmas tree with.

Satisfied, he put the items into a small empty box and made his way up to the register, again cutting past the long line. "Pardon me. Pardon me. Official police business," he muttered to anyone who objected.

He sat the box on the counter, displaying them to Melvald, who promptly punched in the appropriate numbers. When he got to the two stockings he glanced curiously up at Hopper, who pretended to focus on something outside. "Can I wrap anything for you, Chief?" he finally asked as he cut the total in half and waited for the receipt to print.

"A bag'll do it, thanks." He hoped the man wouldn't ask about the dual stockings, he didn't want to have to lie.

Melvald nodded and stuck everything into a paper bag. "Any special

Christmas plans this year? Spending it with anyone special?"

Special? What was he asking? "Just, uh . . . the Christmas party at the station on Christmas Eve, I s'pose. That's about it." Melvald recited his total, and he pulled out a number of bills from his wallet.

Another nod, and what looked like a sympathetic look. "I see. Well, you have a happy holiday, Chief. Don't be a stranger."

Hopper thanked him and exited the store. What was going on with that man? Why was it so important to him how he spent his Christmas? Hopper knew Donald Melvald well, especially from his frequent visits to shoplifting calls, and he knew him well enough to safely say he was acting out of character. He climbed into his truck and backed out of the parking space, aiming for Joyce Byers' home. Maybe she'd noticed her boss acting strangely as well.

Fifteen minutes later the Hawkins Police truck came to a halt in front of the shabby-ish home ten miles away from anything. The gaping hole that had been the most prominent feature of the house for weeks had finally been repaired in time to keep the snow and cold out. Hopper recognized the lights adorning the edges of the roof as the ones that had once hung precariously across the interior walls following the supernatural events that had occurred last year; the year he didn't care to ever speak of again. He shut the truck door, slamming it hard enough to alert the Byers residence of his arrival. Sure enough, he'd only made it to the porch steps when the squeaky front door swung open, revealing a grinning Joyce Byers.

"I wasn't expecting to see you out here, Hop," she said, ushering him inside.

Hopper removed his hat and set it on the dining room table. "Just wanted to drop in, you know. See how you're doin'." It felt good to see her again, and his face couldn't hide it. "I was also wondering if, uh . . ." He dropped his gaze. "If you happened to have any spare lights."

"What, like, the Christmas light strings? Sure, I-I've got plenty of them." Her face gave away her bafflement. "You can take as many as you want. Why?"

Geez, he hadn't anticipated the embarrassment that would follow the purpose of this visit. Then again, he also hadn't anticipated going around town, begging for cheap décor to put up in his remote cabin to be used to celebrate Christmas with his adopted super-powered teenage daughter. Was there anything normal about his life? "I'm tryna get my place all 'festive.' Eleve—Jane asked if I could get some stuff to make it look Christmas-y, and . . . I mean, with my paycheck, and these budget cuts, I'm cutting ends to make it work. Heck, I just got back from Melvald's back room after digging through his reject pile of crap for tree decorations."

Joyce nodded understandingly. "I hear you, Jim. Trust me, I would know." She chuckled and gestured around the home that was slowly falling into disrepair. "I-if you don't mind my asking, why are you doing all of this? I mean, I know she's a great kid and all, but you . . . you're acting like me! The crazy old mom that does everything in her power to make it work." She paused, then looked up at him with confused eyes. "Why?"

Hopper sniffed. He hadn't really pictured himself in the same shoes as Joyce, but her mention of it made him realize she had a point. For a few moments they sat in silence. "I, uh . . . I adopted her, you know," he said at last. "Few weeks ago."

"You did? Oh, Hop! That's wonderful!" To his surprise, she came around the table and gave him a quick squeeze. Their eyes met, and Hopper could see the honest delight in her eyes. "Congratulations!"

"It's something, isn't it?" His grin faded just as quickly as it had come. "But Joyce, this'll be her first Christmas—her first real Christmas, not like the past twelve she spent stuck in that Godforsaken laboratory. I gotta make this one really count. You know? It's really gotta mean something to her. It needs to. And I don't have a *freaking* clue as to how!"

"That isn't anything that you need to worry about. You'll do fine. I mean—if you don't mind my saying so—you've done this before. With Sara. You can do it again, no problem!"

"How? Joyce, it's been so long, and with everything that's happened, I couldn't tell you how in the—"

"You *loved* her, Hop."

Her response was immediate, and for some reason it struck Hopper. He said nothing. He didn't know what to say.

Seeing she struck a chord, Joyce elaborated. "That's why there isn't just—just some parenting handbook out there, that tells you everything you have to know. It's just something that you learn how to do as you go. You care about Jane." She gave a small laugh. "That's why I don't insist on you letting me help take care of her. I know, it's weird, but . . . it's true. I know that you only want what's best for her, and I don't doubt that you're doing your best to keep her safe. And for what it's worth? I think it's *incredibly* amazing, everything that you're doing for that little girl. You're doing good, Hop, and don't you doubt it for a second."

A beat passed, and Hopper suddenly became aware of the moisture building up in his eyes. He jerked his head up and quickly wiped his sleeve across his face. He sniffed again, but not just from the cold nipping at his nose. *Geez Louise, of all the people I could get emotional in front of . . .* "Man, I am getting the worst cold," he muttered hastily.

Joyce laughed again. "I'm sure you are, Chief. Now come on. I have a few extra strings of lights out in the shed."

Relieved, Hopper followed her out to the backyard. Hopefully his emotions would stop running high soon, or else it wouldn't be long before he broke down in front of somebody, and he would never be able to live that down.

It was strange, entering the rickety old shed again. The last time he'd been inside of it, he'd been interrogating Joyce's son Will, whose body had been taken over by a mysterious evil force that was bent on destroying the world. All of the sheets and cardboard had been promptly torn down by Joyce, but the memories of that night still haunted both of them. Now all that remained in the shed was a few old lamps, some tools, and a large collection of neatly-coiled strands of Christmas lights.

"Take your pick," Joyce said, stepping back and gesturing limply towards the assortment of lights. "Jonathon already put up all of the

lights we'll use, and I don't plan on talking to anyone else through them." She offered a hesitant smile. Something told Hopper she hadn't waited long enough for that to become funny.

Making some quick decisions in his head Hopper selected three strands of white lights and four strands of multi-colored ones. "This ought to do it. Thanks. You're really saving my butt here."

Joyce rolled her eyes playfully. "Oh, pshaw. From one overly-protective mama to another, right?" Both had to smirk at that. "Do you want to stay for a while longer? Work doesn't start until three, and I could put on another pot of coffee."

It was a tempting offer, but the life of a cop was always a busy one, even in a small town. "I wish I could. Just keeping my promise to the kid, though, and my lunch break was the last chance I had available to get that all out of the way."

"Wait, you've been running all these errands over your lunch break?"

"Well, I told El I'd get everything before tonight, and who knows when I'll get a break before way-too-late o'clock?"

"So you haven't eaten lunch today?"

Hopper groaned, but before he could say anything else Joyce had slipped past him and made a beeline for her kitchen. "Joyce, it's fine. I had a big breakfast. I can swing by someplace. You don't need to trouble yourself." But every one of his excuses bounced right off of her.

She pulled out a loaf of bread and opened the fridge. "Hop, it isn't good for you to skip meals. That's one of the few parenting tips that don't come by instinct. Unfortunately," he added in a quiet, frustrated tone. "Do you prefer mustard on your roast beef sandwich? How about horseradish?"

"Joyce, you sound like my secretary."

"Well, then, thank goodness for your secretary."

Having Joyce Byers make him lunch really wasn't the worst thing in

the world, he was just anxious to go before she went deep again. Or, rather, *he accidentally* went deep again. He didn't mind at all spending time with Joyce, much less allowing her to dote on him. Heck, it was something he could get used to. But he was concerned about his current emotional level, and he really did have to get back to work. Another time, definitely. Soon, hopefully.

With nothing else to do, Hopper struck up some Christmas-themed conversation, asking about what her boys wanted for Christmas, how hectic it got at the general store, what her holiday plans were.

"Nothing too special since we don't have any family close by," she'd responded, setting a large tomato on a darkened wood cutting board and cutting it into thick slices. "Probably just a shepherd's dinner on Christmas Eve, and a typical Christmas morning. Do you have anything special planned out for you and Jane?"

"I dunno. Maybe I'll rent some Christmas movies for Christmas Eve, and let her do the presents and stockings Christmas morning."

Joyce brightened with a sudden burst of inspiration as she stacked the foods onto whole-wheat bread. "Hey, if neither of us has something in particular planned, maybe we could celebrate together!"

"Together?" Hazard signs flashed in Hopper's mind.

Joyce barged ahead before he could shut the idea down. "Sure, why not? We all can come over to your place—or you two can come here, that would be fine too—oh! And we could finally meet Jane, really meet her. Will is always going on and on about Mike and Eleven. I tell him all the time that it's just rude to refer to someone as a number, but he doesn't ever remember."

"She doesn't mind the nickname. And we can't do that."

"What? Why not?"

Hopper remembered that no one had ever really told her much about El, or the danger posed to anyone who knew anything about her. "Because it isn't safe. Not for her, not for me, not for you, not for anyone. It isn't smart to risk everyone's safety over a holiday get-

together." There was that unintentional anger again. It sure as heck wasn't fair for him to take that tone to a mere suggestion, and it made no logical sense to treat an idea with such hostility. Somehow, though, it couldn't be helped; anger and normalcy now seemed to rest on a fine, delicate line that was prepared to snap at any given notice. It was due to the stress of his job and new parenting responsibilities, obviously, but there was little to be done.

Unsurprisingly, Joyce was taken aback at Hopper's hot reaction. Slightly hurt, she tried to offer more security to her idea. "Well, I-I-I guess we could come when it's dark outside? Or we could take a different car? Is there somewhere else that we could meet up, or—"

"Joyce." Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose and heaved a frustrated breath. "It doesn't work. It hasn't even been a month, there's bound to still be some government lurkers hanging around watching. It'd be stupid to risk something like that."

"But those boys are like, like family to her! You can't just deprive her or them the right to see each other, they'd be devastated! You remember how heartbroken Mike Wheeler was after Jane disappeared the first time, and there is no doubt in my mind she feels the same way about him. You're willing to separate them again over some hunch?"

"And you're willing to risk getting her thrown back into some laboratory over her social life? I'm not trying to be the bad guy here, but it's what I see fit for the situation!"

"Hop, you're getting paranoid over nothing. How long do you think need to keep her hidden?"

Hopper recalled Paul Owens' words. "I was recommended a year."

"A year! That doesn't sound a *little* excessive? And who recommended that?"

"Paul Owens. He got me the paperwork for El."

"Owens? Why are you even taking advice from that lying piece of—"

Hopper took a breath. He needed to calm things down, and then he

needed to leave, before he caused any more damage. His radio was probably going batty. "Look. I obviously won't wait that long. Maybe it'll be soon, I don't know. But I'm just trying to keep her safe. Safe comes before happy." Somehow he managed to keep a cool, neutral tone, but he was having trouble meeting Joyce's eyes. He was afraid of what he'd see in them, or what she'd see in his. He stood abruptly. "I gotta go. Break's long past over. I'll call you."

Without waiting for a response he turned and marched out the front door, Christmas lights in tow. He hurried out to his truck, tossed the lights on the opposite seat, and was about to take off when Joyce tapped on the driver's side window. With some difficulty he cranked it down.

"I heard about that incident you police guys had two days ago," she said weakly. "I know it's making things hard, so I just wanted to tell you I forgive you. You are doing your best." She quickly passed him his sandwich, then scurried up to the front porch, where she gave him a final wave, then stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

Ignoring the static-filled hollering of the truck's built-in radio, he slammed his head against the steering wheel a few times, miraculously avoiding the horn. How could he be so stupid, allowing himself to lose control the way he did and hurt Joyce? He was better than that. Joyce certainly deserved better than that. Thank goodness she knew there was an underlying cause of his lash outs. He would never forgive himself if he caused the poor woman to think he actually hated her. Disgusted with himself, Hopper guiltily bit into the delicious sandwich—roast beef was his favorite—and tore out of the dirt driveway.

Author's Note

Hopper, Hopper, Hopper. You gotta chill a little, dude, before you give yourself a stroke. Let me just say that I had an interesting time writing Donald Melvald. He only has a few lines in the first season, and he isn't ever really dissected (his personality, not himself physically) in the show. I didn't really expect him to, considering he isn't that important of a character, but it did mean I had to develop him myself. I like the guy,

though, and I'm happy with how I write him. He feels pretty realistic. And we finally got to meet Joyce! She was also a difficult character. I'm trying to think how she would, but of course, I'm not a traumatized single mother of two, so I'm just hoping I read her well enough. And her stuttering? It's not for effect or whatever, it's how she talks when she gets nervous or flustered. It's pretty obvious, but I just wanted to say that for any of you stingy writers out there who understand that isn't usually what stuttering is like. Last thing: what on earth was that police incident that Hopper dealt with the night before the first chapter? Will it ever be revealed what's messing with the chief's soul? Of course, I'm not that kind of person. In the last chapter we'll talk about it, I promise. Okay, so the next chapter release is due Saturday, so mark your calendars! It'll be released around the same time as this one, unless I'm working. But we should be good, so don't worry. I'll see you all soon, and I'd really appreciate some feedback on the story! Thank you all for reading, and I'll see you soon! (Next time is much more El and Hopper, it's so adorable IWANNADIEEEE.)

3. Chapter 3

Here it is, chapter 3! It's finally coming together, I can't believe it. Seriously, this is turning out to be a lot bigger than I originally meant it to be. That's so utterly fantastic! Yay! More Stranger Things goodness! Well, yes, except for the fact that this EXCEPTIONALLY long chapter (excluding this intro and the A/N, it's 5,736 words) had to be slightly rushed near the end, and I unfortunately wasn't able to add in a few extra funnies because of time constraints. It's still good, don't get me wrong! Well, I hope it's good. Just not as good as I wanted. And because of this chapter's lengthy length (lol), there will be one more chapter than I intended. More details in the A/N below. On a lighter note, we get to spend all of today with El and Hopper! Yes! I've been dying to write this chapter, I love those two and their relationship to DEATH. Even more than ElxMike, seriously, and those two are utterly MADE for each other. So onto the chapter that makes me dangerously happy inside!

El stared at the white paper before her, focusing every inch of her mind onto the sheet. Her face was contorted into a mask of concentration. She slowly dragged the pencil up and down, left and right, until finally, it was complete. Victoriously she held the paper up to admire her work, grinning from ear to ear. She had finally completed her Christmas list. It had taken nearly two hours of painstaking application and disgruntlement, but it was finished at last. The lettering still had the look of a six-year-old's hand, but it was legible and getting no better for the time being. El knew how to write, but she never had very much practice at all, and her spelling and grammar skills were lacking; however, that hadn't stopped her from expressing herself.

However, as much as she hated writing, she did love to use her pencil for another purpose: drawing. She wasn't particularly great at it yet, but she loved the way it felt to create. The feeling of freedom she experienced when she began to draw lines and curves and shapes, escaping the confinement of rules. On that pad of paper that Mike had sent to her via Hopper, just two days after the dance, El had

discovered a whole new world that was just waiting for her to discover it. She drew all the time, often staying up past her curfew on nights when she felt especially creative. Sometimes there wasn't any specific idea she brought to the pad; sometimes she just set her pencil against a fresh sheet and let her imagination go wild. It was enchanting.

Satisfied at last, El placed the list gently atop her bedspread, then sat down next to it, careful to to wrinkle the page. She sat motionless for a few minutes, pondering what to do next. The list was done, and that had been the extent of her day plan. There wasn't any more cleaning to be done, and she didn't feel like drawing. After a moment's thought, she finally got up and went over to the kitchen, popping open the freezer. It was one of her favorite sights in the world: the frozen space packed with bright yellow boxes of Eggos. With a hungry glint in her eye and a grin on her face she removed a package and shut the freezer door. Hands poised to tear the box open, she hesitated. She enjoyed ruthlessly ripping the box open and earning the prize inside, whereas Hopper preferred her to "open it like a normal person, and not like some savage."

Then again, technically she wasn't supposed to have the waffles for any meal other than breakfast, and only with Hopper's explicit permission. So what the heck? He wouldn't say mad, it was Christmas. She dug her fingers into the cardboard and jerked them away from each other with as much force as she could muster. The box tore in two, and the plastic bag containing the heavenly reward fell at her feet with a fulfilling plop. She stuck two waffles in the toaster oven and put the rest back in the freezer, stuffing the box-less bag behind the other Eggo packages in a lame attempt to hide it. Soon she was sitting at the table, enjoying her breakfast snack. Eggos were at the top of her Christmas list, of course, and she'd added it again three lines down just to get the point across.

It was still quite frustrating that Hopper hadn't given her any ideas as to what she could give him for Christmas. She was steadfast on getting him something, she just didn't know what. And it didn't help that she could never remember what day Christmas was on. She had no idea how much time she had before the big day, and hours were passing by with no progress on Hopper's present.

Finished with her waffles, El made her way over to the stained chair that sat crookedly beside the sofa. *What does he like?*, she wondered, plopping herself down in the squishy chair. Maybe she'd have an idea of something she could make him by correlating it with something she knew he liked. He liked music. Often times on his days off, the record player was blaring nonstop. But she didn't have the money or freedom to walk into town and buy a new record for him, so that was out of the question. He drank and smoked quite a bit, but she had the same problem as before. A great deal of his time was spent out at work, as she knew quite well, so he must love his job. But El couldn't think of something relatable and gift-like. Another negative. He always said he loved her. El laughed aloud at the thought of wrapping herself up and setting herself under a Christmas tree for Hopper. As funny as it sounded, though, she still didn't have the slightest clue as to what Hopper would like for Christmas.

El groaned, sinking down into the chair. Why didn't Hopper just give her an idea of what he'd like to find under a Christmas tree? How on earth could he not want anything else, just be completely satisfied with . . . himself.

He liked himself.

With a sudden burst of inspiration, El shut her eyes and imagined her idea in real life. It wouldn't be easy, but it was certainly plausible. Yes, El Hopper knew exactly what she would give her father on Christmas. She smiled to herself and turned on the television from her place in the chair, using her psychokinetic powers. Now she could finally look forward to Christmas.

The clock on the wall had just struck 4:30 when El was awoken from her nap by the sound of a quickly approaching automobile. Quickly she shut off the television, scampered into her bedroom, and climbed underneath the bed and waited, beginning her slow countdown starting at five hundred. That was what Hopper had instructed her to do if she ever heard something outside when he wasn't home. Fortunately, in the entire year she'd spent at the cabin, she'd only had to do so six times, all false alarms. She assumed it was just someone out on their ATV, like it usually was, but her heart nearly stopped when the engine sound came right up to the cabin, idled for a

moment, and abruptly halted. Things only were made worse when a minute later she heard somebody rustling around the workbench Hopper kept on the side of the cabin. Was it just some scavengers? Hopper had told her once he'd had a few incidents where people stole stuff from his yard to sell for a quick buck. Maybe that was it, and they'd be gone in the next few minutes.

The sound stopped shortly, but the vehicle never started again. Eight minutes came and went, every second filled with an unbearable silence, aside from El's heavy breaths. Fear and curiosity overtook her legs, and she crawled out from her hiding space. She approached the kitchen window and reached to part the curtain, but no sooner had her fingers made contact with the fabric when a brief knock came from the door. El's breath hitched. It hadn't been Hopper's secret knock. But as if the intruder had read her mind, he knocked again, this time using the specified knock Hopper had designed, though it was much faster than Hopper typically knocked. She was prepared to make a dash for the bedroom again when she heard none other than Hopper's voice. "It's me, kid! Get bundled up; we're going on a hike!"

So it was Hopper. El glanced at the clock in disbelief. "Four-four-two." She stuck her head through the kitchen window's curtains. Sure enough, it was Hopper's yellow and tan truck parked haphazardly next to the porch. "Early." She thought for another moment, but saw no drawbacks to the current situation, and she ran off to the coat rack to find her boots, coat, and hat. Once she was properly dressed, she turned her gaze to the door. It occurred to her that this would be only the second time she'd ever opened the door herself, and the first time was when she'd run away just a month before. It was hard to believe it had only been a handful of weeks since she'd gone off on her own to find her birth mother, and then to discover her sister, Kali, who currently resided in Pittsburgh.

El was so lost in her memories that before she had even stood up from tying on her boots the door flew open, and Hopper barged in. He didn't see her from her place on the floor, and he almost walked right past her. Unfortunately for him, El had been developing a quick and devious mind, and with a dastardly fire in her eyes she reached out and grabbed his leg just above the ankle. He didn't fall, but he did jump a foot straight up and let out a rather humorous cry. After a

quick stumble he scanned the ground to locate the source of his fright, and there he found a giggling Eleven, sitting just underneath the coats hanging from the coat rack. He honestly hadn't been expecting the prank, and the fact that it had terrified him made him unable to share the hilarity. "Yeah, har har har, real good one, you little trickster. I just about jumped out of my skin back there. Would you still be laughing after that?" He sighed. "Your boots are on the wrong feet. Switch 'em while I hit the bathroom."

El blinked. It was an ongoing issue she'd been dealing with for awhile. She never felt any difference whether she put her shoes on the designated feet or not—initially. They hurt after an hour or so, sure, but otherwise she didn't particularly care for the concept of left- and right-footed shoes. It was especially irritating because as of lately she'd been putting them on correctly every time.

She removed the boots and began tying them to the right feet just as Hopper exited the bathroom. "You ready to go?"

El stood and nodded.

"Good. Switch your boots again."

"What?"

Hopper chuckled. *So that's what kids call a mind blow, isn't it?* "I lied. You had 'em right the first time." He gave the girl a mirthless grin. "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time."

El pouted.

"Come on, let's get a move on. It'll be dark in an hour."

Soon the two were tramping through the woods side by side. El couldn't stop staring at the axe Hopper held in his right hand, but he refused to offer an explanation, saying, "It would ruin the surprise." When asked what the surprise was, he merely raised his eyebrows at her and said nothing.

They didn't seem to be going anywhere in particular. Generally they walked forwards, occasionally turning a bit to go around a tree and going onwards in the direction they turned. Snow was piled up to El's

ankles, though there were a few deep points that went above her knees. Hopper picked her up and carried her through those parts. And it was quiet. The stream that curved awkwardly around the forest had frozen over, and with all of the birds gone, even the soft crunching beneath their feet seemed to reverberate throughout the wonderland.

El's nose was pink from the cold, and she blew on her fingers at thirty second intervals.

"Chilly?" Hopper asked jokingly. At her short nod, he took her hand and rubbed it between his to warm it. "We'll leave soon. As soon as we find something."

El didn't bother to ask him to elaborate; she knew what he'd say. They walked in silence for a minute longer. The quiet was screaming in the pair's faces, unnerving them both. It almost felt unnatural, which came across to Hopper as suspicious. Still, they trudged onwards.

At one point El began to kick the snowdrifts as she passed them. She looked uncomfortable, and Hopper could tell through his leading grip he had on her hand that she was tense, and not just from the cold. But before he could ask her what was wrong, she spoke. It was a low mumble, nearly inaudible. "Sorry. For scaring you."

Hopper shook his head. "Don't be sorry. I'd say it's pretty normal for someone as bored as you get all the time. And you're just a kid. I pulled dumb stunts all the time back in my school days. One time I —" All of a sudden Hopper stopped and let out a curse, startling El. "There it is, kid," he said in a breathy voice. "There's the surprise, right there."

Heartbeat skipping, El turned to look where Hopper was looking and was amazed to find . . . nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary, anyway. Just trees and pure-white snow, along with a few animal tracks and twigs scattered around. She blinked a few times, but the scene remained unchanged, and she began to worry about Hopper's mental status.

Hopper, on the other hand, remained hypnotized by whatever it was

that had captured his eye, and he started forwards again. El followed uncertainly behind, stepping over ice patches. Soon she found what he was so fixed on: a thickly-needled Virginia Pine tree inches shy of six feet in height. It was almost a replica of the tree Hopper had once shared with his family years ago, before death and grief destroyed everything. It was a good memory, however, one of the few he still had. And he had a feeling that the tree before him now would also carry good memories, and Christmas would no longer be bland and painful.

Pushing memory lane away, he turned to El, who was giving the pine a look of incomprehension. "You know what this is, kid?"

She turned to him, looking slightly annoyed. "It's a tree," she stated flatly.

"Nope. Guess again."

If she hadn't thought him crazy before, there was no doubt she was thinking so now. She shot him a double take. "It's a tree."

Hopper grinned and hefted his axe. "El, this tree is our first Christmas tree."

On their trek back to the cabin, El continuously badgered her adoptive father about the length of the trip. She didn't see what the point of a long hike was, and Hopper repeatedly assured her it was necessary. "Just gotta have the eye for it, kid," he said in place of an actual reason.

The sun was just a speck in the distance when they finally arrived back at the cabin, and the temperature had somehow dropped even further. Which, of course, didn't make him any more popular in El's eyes. It was fortunate he had the wide variety of Christmas decorations from Melvald and Joyce; those items were certain to make him El's favorite once again. Besides, it was Christmas, she'd forgive him soon enough.

It took a few minutes of painful wrestling with the pine to get it through the doorway, but Hopper managed. And the process he had

been afraid would take several hours, finding and clearing a good spot for the tree, did not take long at all, especially with El's powers. The furniture was literally flying into their proper places. Within ten minutes the tiny living room had been rearranged to accommodate the tree, and it comfortably sat in the far left corner from the front door. The cabin was finally beginning to look like Christmas. And since El was having trouble seeing the resemblance between their tree and the lighted, decorated trees she loved so much, Hopper decided it was time to start decorating.

"Hey, kid," he grunted, manually pushing the sofa. "Go get the bags out of my truck. There's three of 'em in the front passenger seat. And no peeking." He received a distrustful look in response, but she slowly pried open the front door and hastily went to retrieve the bags. Hopper was admiring the newly-done room when El burst back into the cabin with bags in hand and a telling grin on her face.

"You looked in the bags," Hopper said, playfully putting his hands on his hips. El initially denied the accusation, but after a moment's thought she nodded, resigned. "Why did you do that even after I told you not to?" He wasn't actually mad at her, but she did need to understand that she couldn't go against his word whenever she felt like it.

El shrugged. She certainly didn't seem regretful. "Had to make sure," she said plainly.

"Of?"

Her chapped lips teased a thin smile. "That it was a good surprise."

Now it was Hopper's turn to smile. "And was it a good surprise this time?"

A short nod. "Yes."

Hopper looked around the room, trying to picture how he wanted it to look. "Then let's get started."

Organizing his priorities, Hopper started with the most important task: putting on Christmas music. "It's December," he explained as he

searched for a specific record. "We listen to music about Christmas now, since it's Christmas's month. It's a tradition." He finally found what he was looking for: his new Christmas album he'd found on half-price at the music shop the previous week. He stuck the record on his turntable and set his other Christmas albums on the floor where they would be easily accessed later in the long night they had ahead of them. The record started playing, and Kenny Rodgers began to sing merrily alongside Dolly Parton, their voices filling the cabin with an unmistakable Christmas spirit. Hopper then hurried out to his truck to retrieve the lights Joyce had lent him, head nodding to the beat of the music. It would be an entertaining night, that much he could tell already.

They started with the tree, at El's request. She seemed anxious to make the hike from before worth its while, and Hopper was happy to indulge her. Before they began, he pulled a medium-sized box from the storage out from under the floor marked rather broad-termed as 'Christmas.' It hadn't been opened in several years, and the box showed its age, but its contents were perfectly preserved. Half of the box was blankets, all winter-themed and made from thick, warm material, but there were a few decorations buried beneath the blankets. Some tree ornaments, and a silver star tree topper, as well as a table topper piece and some Christmas-y kitchen utensils. Hopper passed the ornaments to El with instructions to hang them on the tree while he washed the kitchen supplies. Although he was certain he wouldn't use most of the items, he always set them up anyways as they held a special place in his heart from childhood Christmases. And there were a few things he wanted to use some of the dishes and utensils for. He wasn't the greatest cook, but he knew how to make a select variety of seasonal treats, and he wasn't limited to pre-made cookies from the grocery store, oh, no. It would be a delicious Christmas in the Hopper residence for years to come.

Hopper glanced over at El's workstation as he dried off the large bowl with a reindeer silhouette on the side and gave a snort of laughter. He set the bowl on the counter and approached the tree. "Hey, uh, kid? You can put a little more space between those; you don't need to put 'em so close like that." He gestured toward the thick patch of ornaments covering a ten-inch square patch on the side of the tree.

El stepped back, hanging her head. "Sorry."

"No, I should'a told you the right—best—way to do it. My bad. It works out though. I just got to thinking that we should put the lights on before these things anyway." The two quickly removed the ornaments, and Hopper reached for the white Christmas lights and unraveled them. El stated she wanted the colored lights on the tree, but Hopper shook his head. "Trust me; I got a better idea for those ones."

They started wrapping the lights around the tree together, beginning with El on the bottom of the tree and then passing them to Hopper when she had lighted half of it. She found it comical to watch Hopper walk in circles and squeeze himself between the tree and the wall, to which Hopper responded, "Don't push it, kid, or you'll be lucky to find coal in your stocking." He then had to explain the concept of Santa Clause and make it clear he was only a myth. She was too old to be believing in that stuff, and too literal.

After admiring the tree with all of the lights on, El got to work reapplying the ornaments after a quick tutorial and example Hopper gave her, who got to work nailing up the wreath and the wall hangings around the cabin. In an event of perfect timing, El finished with the tree just as Hopper put up the final wall hanging. "Good timing," he said, setting the hammer on the table. "Next order of business is the stockings, hmm? Sound good to you?"

El nodded uncertainly. "Where?"

Hopper looked around. "That . . ." He paused for a moment, deep in thought. "Is up to you. Wherever you want, I'll hang 'em."

El picked up her stocking, rubbing her finger along the soft red fabric and the white fur. She walked around the cabin, holding the stocking up to several places. She finally settled on the wall that separated her bedroom from the living area, between the large bookcase and the doorframe. Hopper nodded his approval and took his best shot at getting two nails in evenly. Before hanging them, though, El insisted on personalizing her stocking, saying they looked exactly alike and that she didn't want to get Hopper's stocking in place of hers on Christmas morning. Hopper sarcastically agreed it would be a

tragedy, and he found a sheet of Christmas stickers in the box from under the floor and a green marker to write their names with.

After the brief craft break the stockings were hung, one covered in cheap-looking snowmen and candy canes and pine trees, and the other looked similar, only fewer stickers adorned it. El had begged him to allow her to decorate it, and he begrudgingly granted her permission. It made him feel a bit better knowing that no one would see the stockings other than El and him, but it was still rather embarrassing to look at. In his honest opinion, they looked no better than a three-year-old could've done, but of course El didn't need to know that. As long as she liked the way they looked—which she did—then that was all that mattered.

The final main task was to finish the tree by topping it with the star. It had always been his favorite part of Christmas decorating as a kid. His father would lift him up onto his shoulders so he could stick the star on, and he even did so for a few of Hopper's teenage years, until finally he could reach the top of the tree on his own. It wasn't an easy task for his father, but he always did so. Now Hopper realized with a hint of dread that it was his turn to carry on that tradition with his daughter. With luck she only weighed about as much as she looked—not much. He exhaled deeply. "Okay kid, this is it. You get to put the star on the top."

"I can't reach," she said. She sounded upset as she stared miserably up at the tree's tip.

"You can't reach yet. Hold this." He stuffed the shiny star into her hands, then, with a moment's hesitation, he scooped her up and onto his shoulders. She let out a cry of surprise, and then began to giggle. "But now you can," he grunted. "Stick it on there. Quick."

Though a bit nervous from the sudden altitude change, El still was amazed by her new view. She looked around the Christmas-y room, then proudly stuffed the star over the tree, forcing it over the limp branches. "Got it!" she said victoriously.

Hopper quickly brought her back down and rubbed his neck. "Took your sweet time up there." But he quickly forgave her and took a step back to admire the fully-decorated tree. Well, almost fully decorated;

about six inches of the very top was ornament-less. He shot El a questioning glance before realizing that she couldn't reach that high. *Gotta get a step ladder up in here for her*, he thought. "There we go, kid. It looks—"

Suddenly the star tumbled down the tree, causing Hopper to curse loudly. El looked surprised. The star was fine, fortunately; it had landed on the pile of blankets from the Christmas box. Hopper went over and picked it up, inspecting it for damage and, thankfully, finding none. He turned to El. "Shoot. If you want to put it up again, we can pull over a chair or something. I'm not picking you up again." But before he had even finished his sentence the star floated from his hands and gently atop the tree again, nestling down deep over the branches this time. Hopper watched, taken completely off-guard. In the corner of his eye he noticed El wiping her nose with her sleeve. "Don't tell me you could've done that this entire time?"

El shrugged. "You never asked me."

With a groan Hopper flopped onto the couch. He lay there for a few seconds, his hands covering his face. Suddenly he heard another groan, and El imitated his fall, landing right next to him. He moved his hand so he could see her. She was watching his face intently. "Is that what you do when you're all done?" she whispered.

Hopper laughed aloud, like he used to back in the older days. "That's right, kid. That's what we do."

The two lay on the couch together, taking in the satisfaction of their accomplishments and listening to Bing Crosby's peaceful crooning. Not talking, just relaxing. Being together. And in Hopper's case, waiting for the pain in his shoulder to die down.

El quickly became bored, and she asked if they could turn on the television. Upon glancing at the clock, Hopper remembered that Christmas movies usually started to play on channel six at 7:30; a half-hour from then. Just enough time to prepare a quick, holiday-themed food to munch on. "Yeah, go ahead. I'll make something to eat, and then we'll watch some Christmas stuff, m'kay?"

The television was on halfway through his sentence.

Hopper shook his head and got to his feet. El barely seemed to notice him leave the room, which was fine with him. He already knew what he was going to make, and he wanted it to be a surprise, and it didn't appear that his wish would be in jeopardy. She had an addiction to that screen, though it wasn't necessarily her fault; she didn't have anything else to do while stuck here 24/7. Hopefully he'd be able to wean her off when it was safe to introduce her into the rest of the world. Like Joyce, he agreed that a full year of waiting was much too long. If it seemed that the coast was clear of government people and scientists and snoops, he would probably just keep her here for another six to seven months, just until school started up again.

He sighed. Hopefully it wouldn't be too costly to educate El. She was in no way prepared for junior high yet, and she'd either have to be homeschooled or privately taught, for there was no way she would do well in a public school, especially while surrounded by children much younger than her. And the bullying would be endless. He was certain Mike Wheeler and his friends would protect her from the brunt of it all, but there was no way it would be completely avoided. And he knew from experience that when El became emotional, her powers were nearly uncontrollable. And that wouldn't stand, considering the fact that it was vital to keep her and the rest of Hawkins under the radar.

Hopper shook his head in an attempt to clear it as he pulled out the large bowl with the reindeer silhouette on it. It wasn't the time to be worrying about such things yet, especially not with Christmas quickly approaching. Only less than a week remained until the world-renown holiday, and there was still plenty to do. Christmas shopping was one thing. He'd have to ask El later if she'd finished her list. She most likely had, considering her fantastic memory and the massive amount of time available to her during the day. He decided that he'd get his shopping done while out in town for work tomorrow, as he had done that very day. And once he had candy for the stockings and the gifts for under the tree, he would have much less to worry about, for his and El's Christmas would then be practically complete.

Thirty-five minutes later, Hopper and El were relaxing on the sofa, sipping eggnog and enjoying gingerbread while watching Rudolph

the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Hopper was having trouble keeping his eyes open; it had been a long day, and sleep was steadily overcoming him. El was wide awake and entranced by the old animation playing on the television, no surprise to Hopper. She had been quite hesitant to taste the "egg drink" at first, but after reassurance that it was delicious and that there was no trace of spinach in it, she finally tried a bit from the ladle. It took a lengthy explanation to keep her from drinking it as fast as she could and asking for more, warning her of the richness of the drink, and while the girl still wasn't satisfied, she begrudgingly took her time to finish the cup.

Just minutes before the two had sat down, El had excitedly turned in her Christmas list, strongly communicating that she had put forth much effort in her writing as per Hopper's requests. The handwriting was atrocious, but it was legible, which he praised her for. Half of the list Hopper immediately rejected, including items like a bicycle or a lazy boy chair. No way could he afford those. Fortunately, there was also a number of plausible gifts: books, dresses, Star Wars action figures—"like Mike's"—and, of course, Eggos. It was a nice assortment and a cheap one as well. Something told him that his daughter was going to be an easy shopper.

It was quiet in the cabin. The television screen was dark, and it was dark everywhere but the living room, where a single lamp remained on. No crickets chirped, and the wind was still, so no branches scraped along the roof. It was silent but homely. It was the way both Hoppers preferred it. Hopper was asleep, sprawled out on the little mattress beside the furnace. The clock now read 1:30, but he hadn't been snoozing for long. He'd woken up when El turned off the television and went to get ready for bed at eleven o'clock, the unintentionally humorous curfew they had settled on. After an hour's wait to make certain she was asleep, he had gotten up to take care of the final Christmas decoration he'd been planning for hours. It was painstaking, moving the chair around and gently hammering without making any loud sounds, but at last he'd finished, and he could finally rest at ease, no doubt in his mind anymore that El would indeed have a good first Christmas.

El awoke, her head buried underneath the blankets and sheets as she often did to stay as warm as she could. She had learned long ago that she had full control of her internal clock, and she could make herself get up at any time she wanted—anytime down to the minute. Hopper was bound to be sound asleep, for if her mind proved to be as reliable as usual, it was two AM on the dot, and she could finally begin working on Hopper's present. Wriggling out of the blanket cocoon, however, she was astounded to find her room was lit up in shades of red, green, blue, and yellow. She sat up and took in the breathtaking sight, slowly looking around the walls. Hopper had hung the multi-colored lights up in her room. The lights were kind of dim, and there were a few bulbs were missing their outer casings, but El didn't care. It was marvelous. It was like a Christmas dream-come-true.

However, as much as she wanted to stay in her room and gaze at the lights until her eyes couldn't stay open, she had been dying of anticipation to begin Hopper's gift, and she only had a few hours until he got up. It was a good thing Christmas was still a number of days away, because she had a lot of work to do, and she refused to allow herself to feel rushed. A rushed gift didn't hold the same value as a gift that took much time and effort—or so El believed. With that thought in her mind, she pulled her door open, being mindful of the hinge that squeaked if it was opened too slowly, and stuck her head out. The clock confirmed she had awoken at the desired time, and a gentle, grumbling snore promised Hopper's deep slumber.

Satisfied, El ducked back into her bedroom and reemerged with her sketchbook in hand. She entered the kitchen and snuck another gingerbread man that was only slightly burned around the edges, despite Hopper's common vocalization of his poor baking skills. Sure, she'd only had cookies a few times before, but Hopper's cookies were her second favorite; Joyce Byers' chocolate chip cookies were number one, and always would be.

Snack in hand, she turned on the tall lamp that sat near the comfy chair in the living room, rotated the chair until it was facing the appropriate direction, took a seat, and began to sketch.

Author's Note

AAAAAHH IT IS UNBEARABLY CUTE. This chapter was so hard yet so fun to write. Oh, those two and their antics, you'd think they were both clueless little kids. It's always hard for me to write stuff that makes me really feel the emotions I try to convey, and this is one that just cracks me up at all the little jokes. I can just picture them playing out in my head, and just love it love it love it love it. Can I platonically ship them? Well, I platonically ship them. So as I stated earlier, and probably the only reason anyone is reading this A/N, there will be another chapter. This one will be shorter (I tell myself), and, being released on Christmas Eve, will encompass the events of this story's Christmas Eve. I meant to cover those events in this chapter as they are fairly minor events, mostly just for the sake of the plot, but I ran out of space and time. So yeah. I've been busy literally all day every day of this week, except for part of Wednesday, when I posted a chapter and began this one, so I've fallen WAY behind my writing schedule. I can see a lot of nonstop writing sessions happening in the next few days. So I hope you have enjoyed this chapter full of my questionable sense of humor, and I'll be back on Christmas Eve!

4. Chapter 4

AHHHH THIS WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE 4,500 WORDS LONG! This was only supposed to be 2,000 AT MOST, so I would have plenty of time to work on the next and final chapter, which needs to be finished in 24 hours, but nooo, I just couldn't help myself, could I?

Merry Christmas Eve, everybody! Thank you all so much for sticking with me through this story, and a special thanks to musicnlyrics for the way-too-kind review you left me! You absolutely made my day, friend! If you guys like amazingly-written Bones stories, check out musicnlyrics for some great short ones.

This chapter was interesting, because I finally got to write about the other stars of Stranger Things: the Party! (Aside from Max, she wasn't mentioned at all, that was unintentional, and I'm sorry, but I'm on a short deadline and don't have the time to edit Max in.) My goodness, Dustin has by far my favorite lines, even though there's only a handful of 'em! That kid is really something. Just be warned, this chapter does have a kind of rushed feel to it, because it didn't really go as I had originally planned and I had to keep improvising on the fly. But it's still important to the story and has some funny bits in it, which are the only reasons I'm even uploading this chapter. Enjoy!

ALSO: Word glitched up for some reason and it basically copied and pasted bits of sentences sporadically around this chapter. I'm 99% sure that I got all of them, but just in case you find one, PM me what the out-of-place text says and about where in the story it is. Thank you, and sorry for any inconvenience!

"I'm telling you guys, it has got to be a Nintendo! It's the same shape and everything!" Mike Wheeler said, growing frustrated at his friends' ignorance. He was currently speaking with his other three friends via walkie-talkie, their preferred method of contact.

"Mike, there's a lot of things that are shaped like a box," Lucas

Sinclair said, exasperated.

"Yeah," Will Byers wistfully agreed. "Sorry, Mike, but Lucas has a point."

"Maybe we could measure it," Dustin Henderson said thoughtfully. "See if it matches the NES box dimensions in the Sears catalogue."

Lucas sighed. "Or, get this: *he could just wait another twenty-four hours and see for himself*, instead of doing all that work."

It was Christmas Eve morning, and the boys were discussing their theories on what exactly sat under their Christmas trees. The clocks showed it was a quarter to 8, but in the Wheeler residence, Mike was the only one up. He had to keep his voice down, as to not awaken his parents or sisters and suffer the ultimate consequences. Why they were so serious about sleeping in, Mike didn't know, for he preferred to get up as early as possible—on the weekends or over school breaks. Unfortunately, because of his parents' habit, he had to wait until they awoke to get their permission to meet up at Will's house and play on his Atari 5200, as they'd been planning to do for a week. So to pass the time, the boys—who all were wide awake before seven AM—sat around and chatted through their talkies.

Mike was lying atop a pile of blankets in the basement where he'd slept the night before, and was surrounded by books. He'd spent all of the day before and most of the night studying guides and strategy books for Dungeons and Dragons to be prepared for the next campaign. As he and the rest of the Party, as they called themselves, had done for the past four years, they had a massive campaign organized for the beginning of the New Year, one that only got better and better with time. "Like fine wine," as Lucas's father liked to say. This year was no exception; since the last big campaign they had upgraded most of their pieces, gotten a new board, and had gained much more skill in their roles. When they weren't talking about what presents they were sure to receive, they were talking about the campaign.

"Guys, there isn't anything else it could be," Mike insisted. "The Nintendo was the only thing I put on my Christmas list."

Dustin whistled. "Good move. Don't give 'em any other option." He was lying on his bed, a stack of comic books strewn about the bedspread and floor. His mom had spent the night in the easy chair dozing on and off while watching reality TV, and she had no problem with nearly anything her son did.

"You didn't put anything else on your list?" Lucas asked, obviously not believing Mike's statement. His lived in a family of early risers, and everybody but his little sister was ready to start the day by 6:30 on the dot. He had biked over to Dustin's house to be a bit closer to the Byers' place. He lived the farthest away from everyone in the Party, a full ten minute bike ride just to get to Mike's, and over a half-hour ride to Will's. As he usually did, he biked over to the Henderson residence to wait with Dustin until they got the A-OK from Will that it was fine to go over, since Dustin lived about fifteen minutes away from him.

"No! I mean, besides a couple small thin—*small things*, Lucas. That's it, I swear!"

Will tossed in his two cents: "I think that was smart of Mike. He was making sure that he'd get something he wants, even if he doesn't get the Nintendo." He was sitting at the kitchen table and working on a Star Wars drawing while his mother made breakfast, the frying pan sizzling in the background whenever he transmitted.

"Thank you!"

"Or we could weigh the present of question with my bathroom scale. The Nintendo weighs approximately five point five pounds, so if it's—ow! What the heck, man?" Behind the scenes of the radio conversation, Lucas had rolled up Dustin's Sears catalogue and smacked him in the head with it, interrupting his suggestion.

Lucas's muffled voice came through Dustin's walkie-talkie, which was still transmitting. "Just shut up, dude."

"You shut up; I'm trying to solve a mystery, here!"

"It won't be a mystery tomorrow morning. And you're driving me crazy!"

"Stop blocking my youthful urges to do this stuff. We'll all be teenagers soon, and our childhoods will be gone forever! We need to indulge our childish sides before it's too late!"

Mike rolled his eyes while he waited for the two to calm down. They were dear friends, but they certainly acted half their age at least half of the time. He turned up the volume on the talkie and made his way over to the campaign table set up in the center of the room, covered with the D&D board, the container that held the miscellaneous pieces and papers that went to the game, and numerous pizza-grease and soda stains. A lot of memories had been made with that table, he realized. Through every game, each Party member got to know each other a little better. And slowly, bit by bit, the boys who had once been merely a D&D club grew to be brotherly friends. They'd all been through a lot together, especially in the past year. Mike's eyes wandered over to the blanket fort against the wall, and the sight of it brought back the inimitable memories it held. Losing Will. Finding El. Feeding, sheltering, educating, and befriending her. Who would have known that the Eggo-obsessed girl they met in the forest one night would drastically change their lives forever?

Mike was suddenly aware of someone calling his name repetitiously. He glanced around, mind spinning from the old emotions that had begun to arise. Shaking his head, he reached for the talkie. "Yeah—yeah, sorry. I'm here."

The radio was silent for a moment. "Are you okay, Mike?" Lucas asked, concern lacing his tone. "We've been calling and calling."

"I'm fine, I swear. I was just thinking . . . You know, about El."

Dustin groaned. "Ah, crap, not again."

For once, Lucas had to concur with Dustin, an extraordinarily rare occurrence. "Mike, come on. Please don't do this again."

"Do what?"

"Start going on and on about Eleven. We know you love her and all that—"

"I do not love her!" Mike interrupted, his face flaming up.

"Whatever. But at least you know she's safe now. She's living with the friggin' chief of Hawkins! She'll be fine, I'm sure she misses you too, and you'll see her soon enough. Okay, dude?"

But Mike wasn't going to let the subject drop easily, and Lucas had only stoked the flames. "Guys. This is different." He sat down again and took hold of the talkie with both hands. "El has changed all of our lives, and she's been a total lifesaver. Literally, she's saved all of our butts at some point. Heck, she saved the whole town, the whole world!"

"With our help," Dustin added.

"The point is, we've been through all of this stuff together, us and El. She's like family now! It's just weird, having Christmas without her. It's like not having your sister there with you to unwrap presents, or eat Christmas dinner, or—or just be with! Imagine Christmas if we hadn't ever met before."

The talkie released a chorus of gasps of dramatic shock.

"Oh, my gosh."

"Whoa."

"That would be really weird."

"Exactly. It barely even makes sense, right? It just wouldn't be right."

Lucas finally dropped the comic book he'd been glancing through and picked up his walkie-talkie. "Okay, so you do have a point. But so what? The chief said we can't see her, and we don't even know where he lives, *if* you were actually stupid enough to sneak out to his place. And that's a *huge* if, Mike. Nobody's that stupid."

"Maybe we could ask him," Will chimed in. Unbeknownst to him, Joyce was eavesdropping on the conversation, a bad habit she'd picked up while dealing with the paranoia following the events involving the Mind Flayer. "If we tell the chief how much we want to see Eleven—er, El—then maybe he'll let us. Just one time."

Joyce stuck two pieces of bread into the toaster, endeavoring to keep herself out of the Party's exchange, but at last she couldn't help it. She couldn't bear to see Mike Wheeler missing El so much, possible because she knew what it was like to have a loved one stuck somewhere yet you just can't get to them, no matter how hard you try and beg and plead. Of course, she remembered everything that Hopper had said to her, and she didn't want to go against his word. However, she also felt that Hopper was simply being paranoid—another shared point between him and herself—and she saw a greater good coming from acting upon her own decisions. "Will? Honey?" she asked, carrying a plate of eggs and sausage. "Let me talk to them."

"Will looked confused and a bit startled. "What? Um, o-okay." He hesitantly pressed the walkie-talkie into Joyce's outstretched hands.

Joyce took a breath to clear her cog-grinding mind and depressed the transmit button. "Boys? This is Joyce Byers."

A chorus of polite greetings came readily, all unintelligible from the static and jumbled words.

Fortunately, Joyce didn't seem to notice their sudden change in behaviour. "Listen, Mike? Michael? I know you miss Jane. And . . . I don't think that Chief Hopper is making a very good choice. It—it isn't his fault; he doesn't understand how much Jane means to you all." She paused, still not completely certain she was making the right decision, but she firmly told herself to stick to her resolve. She swallowed tightly, then said the binding words. "I want to help you see Jane. I'll make sure you get to. We can talk about it when you get here."

It was a slow afternoon for the Hawkins police department. Jim Hopper sat in the lobby with his partners Phil Callahan and Calvin Powell while a few policewomen cleaned and decorated the station for the upcoming Christmas party. Hopper thought it was ridiculous to put up lights and wreaths and "other wastes of the budget," but he had learned a few years back that it was a good idea to leave it be.

Currently he was listening to Callahan rant on and on about the Star

Wars movie that had been released several months ago. He was attempting to explain the wonders of the latest and greatest movie to Powell, who, by the sound of it, wasn't at all enthused by it. "See, it's just full of ingenious new characters and special effects," Callahan was saying, growing more and more animated. "And I gotta say, that whole turns-out-they're-all-family thing they did was absolute genius."

Powell raised his eyebrows, unimpressed. "Hmm. But the brother and sister, you said they had some relationship before they knew they were brother and sister? Seems pretty wrong to me, all that funny business." He reached for a newspaper resting on the desk to his left.

"No, no, no, they never went *that* far, okay? George Lucas knows where too far is too far."

Powell tossed the paper aside, annoyed by the out-of-date marking in the paper's corner. "Mm-hm. Whatever."

Callahan sighed in disgust. "Cal, it's starting to feel like you aren't even listening to me anymore. Hopper, are you seeing this right now?"

With a devious grin, Hopper simply turned to another page of the file he was looking over, glancing at the man from the corner of his eye without even turning to face him.

"Real mature, Chief," Callahan muttered, getting up from his chair to get another mug of cocoa. "I'll get to you one of these days, Cal. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll turn you to the light side." He chuckled at his little joke.

A groan came from behind Powell's political page of last week's newspaper. "I can't wait. Stuck with you for three hours, that's exactly how I pictured my Christmas going. Lord, have mercy on my soul."

"Hey, maybe you can stick with the chief tomorrow, then." Callahan slipped past Flo as she hung up a wreath and returned to the seat at his desk, poking Hopper's shoulder as he passed. "How're you planning to celebrate this year, Hopper? Hand out some parking tickets with Christmas cards stuck on them?"

Hopper glanced up at the grinning man, giving him a warning look. He understood where Callahan was coming from, however. For the past three Christmases, Hopper, not having a family to spend time with, had stayed out all day, tending to the many calls of public order crimes and searching for traffic violations. As he saw it, there was nothing better for him to do, and there were plenty of bills that needed to be paid. "Well, believe it or not, I actually have plans this year."

Powell choked on his coffee. "What're you, serious?"

"Ah, he's pro'lly just going to sleep all day," Callahan said offhandedly. "Right, Chief? Maybe see if that librarian has any plans?"

"I'll be spending it with my—uh . . ." He thought quickly, putting on a casual expression. "Relatives. Yup. From New York. Brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts; the whole nine yards."

Patty, the Hawkins Police dispatcher, let out a happy cry, getting the attention of two female workers. "I knew it! I heard rumors that Jim had been getting a bunch of Christmas decorations, but I could hardly believe it. Until now, of course. Ooh, I'm so happy for him!" The three gals squealed like a bunch of schoolgirls while Hopper and his partners looked on in confusion, Powell and Callahan finding the scenario quite entertaining. They didn't seem to realize that the man they were talking about was only feet away from them, and could hear every word they spoke.

Flo shot Hopper a glance that seemed to be of approval, but it was so brief he couldn't tell. "Well, don't have so much fun that you can't hear the phone. There are always plenty of calls on Christmas, and there's a fine chance you'll have to take care of a few of them."

Ah, shoot. Hopper hadn't thought about that, but it was true. Every Christmas there was at least a dozen callouts where he was requested, and there weren't any phones in the cabin. He'd have to take El to the trailer for a few hours, most likely. "Yeah, yeah," he grumbled. "I'll be free in the evening; I'll make sure of it. But try not to make me work. Nobody needs to see me specifically just because they think that we're friends and I'll go easy on 'em, and Elmer Humphrey

can have anyone go up and get carolers off of his yard."

"And are you inviting your new beau to your Christmas celebration?" Callahan asked mockingly?" At Hopper's empty look, he elaborated. "Joyce Byers? You spend way too much time over there for any of us to think otherwise."

"We're just waiting for you to go public to make fun of you for it," Powell mentioned.

"So we don't lose our jobs."

Hopper sighed and rubbed his face. "I won't fire you, Phil. I'll just assign you to every shoplifting incident Robert Groves calls in." Robert, the owner of one of the Bradley's Big Buy stores, was notoriously known around the police department for making almost daily calls in about a shopper he believed had stolen merchandise. Every officer despised the man, and nobody ever volunteered to take care of him. They had to develop a system that evenly distributed his calls to every Hawkins police officer on the force so it didn't always fall to the chief or senior officers. "And no, I will not be seeing Joyce, because our relationship is purely platonic, and it will remain that way for as long as you live."

"So if Phil was to mysteriously vanish one night, you'd date Joyce Byers?"

"Heck, I might, just to celebrate."

"Does the holiday spirit affect anyone in this town?" Callahan muttered, shooting what he hoped were death glares in Powell's and Hopper's directions.

All this talk of Joyce made Hopper realize that he still hadn't gotten the said woman a Christmas gift as he'd told himself he would several months ago. As much as he tried to deny it, he knew that the real reason behind the promise came from his feelings for Joyce. And while it was true when he'd said that Joyce and he weren't together, he hadn't said anything about not wanting to be. Sometimes he dismissed his feelings as the product of desperation and anxiety, but if mentally confronted while in Joyce's presence, his mind wouldn't

be singing the same song as it usually proclaimed.

But all he knew for sure right then was that Christmas was in less than twelve hours, and he had nothing for Joyce, not even an inkling of an idea. Panic began to set in, and he got abruptly to his feet, startling his coworkers. Without any explanation he donned his coat and made his way out to his truck, ignoring the queries that followed him up to the station doors and no farther.

What was he going to get Joyce? He didn't really know her like a normal friend. He wasn't aware of her likes and dislikes, favorites, or preferences. Thinking about how little he actually knew about Joyce, he felt embarrassed, considering how much time he really had spent with her over the past year. Really, neither one of them had really opened up to the other, and she probably didn't know all that much about him, either, which was a bit of a relief. But relief offered no assistance to Christmas shopping, and he didn't know where he should start. The first thing that came to mind was jewelry, but it was so expensive, and a cheap, random piece wouldn't hold the value Hopper wanted in his gift. He could browse the shelves of Melvald's, which would still be open for another few hours, but he was afraid something from there would be tacky and not feel very meaningful.

For the next two hours, Hopper drove around Hawkins, driving slowly by the strips to see if they held any potential places of business and scanning every advertisement in sight for inspiration. He even stopped to call a few female acquaintances for gift advice. He was recommended coffee mugs, sweaters, bathrobes, cooking wares, desserts, and everything and more than Hopper could ever imagine. But nothing struck him as appropriate for Joyce Byers, no matter where he searched.

It was nearly five o'clock when Hopper was summoned to Albert Cunningham's home on a domestic violence callout. Albert was a heavy drinker, one of the disastrous effects of the PTSD he received from serving in Vietnam for eight years. He wasn't always violent, but his short temper combined with alcohol did result in the occasional fight. In the fading daylight, Hopper despairingly watched open signs blinking out, never to show their light again until after Christmas day. He dejectedly informed dispatch that he was on his way and to have another officer be there waiting for him. He knew that there

would be a Christmas where he surprised Joyce with the perfect present, but this year would not be that year.

A pair of headlights unhurriedly approached the trailer that sat on the edge of Thompson's Pond. A stray undershirt waved sharply from the umbrella clothesline in the gusty wind, threatening to come free of the single clothespin holding it in place. The sun had gone down long ago, and the area clicked back into pitch blackness when Hopper removed the keys from the ignition. He sat in his truck while his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he located the trailer key out of his weighty key ring. It had always been a hassle finding the right key, and he'd finally gone to get the key imprinted with a red covering to make it stand out. Three months after doing so, of course, he'd taken El in and basically moved into the cabin. Talk about poor timing.

Hopper exited the truck and stepped up to the trailer's cheap front door, the exhaustion evident in his gait. He jabbed the key around the area of the deadbolt until it finally slipped into the keyhole, then let himself in for the first time since a week before Thanksgiving. When he flipped the light switch, the long absence of his became obvious: dust covered every surface and floated freely about the trailer, and mold patches coated the plates of half-eaten food that sat on every table and counter. The mess of laundry, beer cans, cigarette butts, and books and magazines only made the sight all the more overwhelming.

With a tired sigh, Hopper picked his way through the mess to the bathroom. On the coffee table, a digital alarm clock's screen flashed, waiting to be reset, but Hopper knew it couldn't be any earlier than seven PM. It hadn't taken too long to get Albert subdued, but the aftermath of the situation had taken even more of his time. He flicked on the bathroom light and examined his face in the mirror. His nose had begun to bleed again, and his black eye looked no better than it had before he'd left the station with the ice pack Flo had instructed to keep on it. When he'd arrived back at the station, Flo had taken one look at his darkened eye and bloody face and forced him to sit down while she cleaned him up. A kind gesture, really, but all he had wanted was to leave.

He took a piece of toilet paper and wiped away the fresh blood, but

the skin between his nose and upper lip was still faintly stained crimson. Ah, well.

Although he craved sleep, he exited the bathroom and began to tidy up the trailer. It was the last thing he wanted to do right then, but if he was going to bring El there, then he needed it to be in a fairly decent condition. The last thing he wanted was for her to be stuck surrounded by his dirty socks, beer cans, and loose pain medication. That would not be a good fatherly example. It took him a half-hour, but afterward the trailer could've passed a health inspection, excluding the pile of trash bags on the back porch and the mildew growing behind the toilet.

It was such a disappointment, that he'd have to wait a full year for his next opportunity to gift something to Joyce. He'd been anticipating the moment where he offered her the perfect gift, something that would blow her away, sweep her off her feet. But now he was stuck, with his hourglass empty and nothing to give Joyce. At least he had gotten El's present already, seeing as she was the only one anticipating something from him.

Before he left for the cabin again, he stumbled into the second bedroom, the one he only used for storage, and fell onto the bed. If he left for the cabin right then, he had no doubt he'd fall asleep right at the wheel, so he believed a fifteen minute nap was in order before leaving. He clumsily punched in the amount of time into a functioning alarm clock resting on the nightstand and promptly fell asleep, unaware of the miracle he'd discover when he awoke . . .

El was lying in bed, already in her pajamas and ready to go to sleep, when she finally heard the secret knock. With a quick moment of concentration, the deadbolts securing the door slid to their unlocked position, and the door creaked open. El didn't bother to get up; Hopper would eventually find her, after he'd settled in. He'd find the TV dinner awaiting him on the table, the television already off, all of the chores taken care of, and the lights adorning the Christmas tree shut off; everything he expected to be completed before she hit the sack.

But fifteen minutes passed, and he still hadn't called out, poked his

head into her room. Heck, she'd barely heard a sound since he'd shut the front door. Curious, she wriggled out of her pile of blankets and padded over to the doorframe of her bedroom. The meal sat untouched, still covered with the foil wrapping. Now Hopper's gun and belt rested next to the dinner, and his badge had fallen to the floor, partially underneath the table. She went to retrieve it, and, after blowing the dust from the decorated brass piece, she laid it gently on the table and approached the living room. It was dark; the only illumination came from the lights in the kitchen that she had left on for Hopper. She reached over and flipped on the lamp beside the sofa. There, sprawled halfway on the sofa, halfway hanging off of it, rested Hopper.

He awoke from the sudden brightness, then, after a few weary blink, he noticed El hovering above him. "Oh, hey, kid," he mumbled. "Sorry I never . . ." A yawn cut him off. " . . . never signaled you. It's been a rough coupla' hours."

"Bleeding." She pointed to his nose, and she gave his blackened eye a concerned look as well.

Hopper swiped at his nose, smearing blood across his jacket sleeve. "Like I said. Rough. It's fine. Hey, what time is it?"

El beamed proudly. "Eighty-three zero."

"Eight-thirty. What where you doin' in bed already? You sick or somethin'?"

In all seriousness, El pointed at the clock. "I go to sleep early, Christmas comes faster."

Hopper's vision began to swim. He was seriously exhausted, and he fought to not fall asleep in the middle of their conversation. "Yeah, that's real smart thinking. Listen, kid, do me a favor: don't wake me up until eight, minimum. Yeah?"

El nodded, and just like that, he was out like a light again. She went and fetched a thick blanket so put over the man, as his face was red and his fingers wouldn't stop shivering. As she was tugging a knitted wool blanket over the man, she found a small box gripped loosely in

his left hand. It was rectangular, and no longer than a brand-new pencil. It looked nice, as well, being a snowy white with thin black lettering on the front and sides in such a curvy manner of handwriting that El couldn't make out a single letter. Deciding against her inquisitiveness, El gently removed the package from his half-frozen hand and took it to the kitchen, where she set it on the counter. She then stuck his dinner in the fridge, turned out the lights, and went back into her bedroom. The multi-colored lights were still on, lighting up the girl's room quite nicely, and she tugged another pair of socks over her feet before crawling back into bed, and she drifted off to sleep with an excited smile on her face, shivering with anticipation of the morning that could not come soon enough.

Author's Note

AAAAAWWWW! I'm still platonically shipping them, guys. It's just too perfect. I hope you all enjoyed this Christmas Eve chapter, and I hope you'll all enjoy my next and final chapter, which I am DESPERATE to get done tomorrow. It will be safe to say, though, that it will be out in the later time of day tomorrow AT THE EARLIEST. If by some curse I don't manage to get the chapter done and published on Christmas, then expect it the day after, because I REFUSE to make you guys wait any longer than you must. I'm talking to you loyal guys who care about this story, not the ones who simply want me to pump out chapters for you. I would just like to point out, that initial conversation between Callahan and Powell about Star Wars was NOT meant to be offensive in any way! I just had Star Wars on the brain, and I could see Callahan being a total Star Wars nerd while Powell was just confused by it, and hilarity ensues. Okay? Don't kill me. I wonder what that package is, that Hopper has? And what Joyce is planning with the rest of the Party? And what the heck was that dark crime from the beginning of this story that I have been totally excluding from my latest chapters (oops)? All of these questions should be answered in the Christmas chapter finale, which I seriously need to go start writing. Goodbye, and thanks for checking this out! Happy holidays!

5. Chapter 5 pt 1

MERRY CHRISTMAS! Welcome back, Stranger Things fans! Before we start off, I'd like to thank iAmCC for the kind reviews, and all of the other 688 of you that have viewed this crazy ol' story! All of you are so amazing!

So I have some news, though I don't know if it's necessarily good or bad. As you may remember, I fell behind on my writing schedule due to some work, and as of a few days ago, I ran out of pre-written chapters. As in, I've been publishing chapters as I finish them so I can be on schedule. Heck, I started this chapter from scratch just yesterday morning! I tried my hardest to complete this story today, I was hell-bent on getting it written; but despite my literally day-long writing session, I can't post the final chapter today. I'm honestly astounded by how much writing I got done in just one day (about three typical days' worth), but the plot for this chapter included too much for me to write in one chapter, and I didn't have enough time to write two full-length, half-decent chapters. So I sincerely apologize if you looked forward to seeing this story get marked 'complete' today like I was, but it just didn't work. On the bright side, however, this means another chapter! As in, for those of you who aren't sick of me yet, you get to see one more update on this story! Yay! So without further ado, the Christmas chapter: part one!

When Hopper's eyes opened again, everything was orange-tinged. The sunrise was just beginning to swell over the horizon, and peach-colored rays streamed forth. It had been a solid, dreamless sleep that had effectively acted as a method of recuperation for the long period of exhausting, restless nights he'd been enduring lately, though he wasn't completely sure as to why he'd woken up yet. He honestly felt like he could've used another few hours of shut-eye, but otherwise he was feeling much stronger and well-rested than the previous day.

So it was finally Christmas. The fact slowly dawned on him as his brain cleared away the sleepy haze. After all of the weeks of preparation, the biggest, most wonderful time of the year had

arrived. Funny, then, how little of an effect it had. Hopper felt no different than he did the day before, aside from the pain in his face that had begun to dull at last. Maybe it was because he wasn't a big holiday guy, or maybe because Christmas was always dramatically overhyped by everybody everywhere, and so when the holiday did come around, they began to realize that all they actually had to look forward to was receiving gifts and candy. Just a thought Hopper had.

But enough with the Scrooginess; it was Christmas morning! And speaking of Christmas morning, why hadn't El gotten him up yet? As he thought about it, he deduced the possible causes to either it wasn't eight o'clock yet, or El was still asleep. The latter option could easily be ruled out, since he had never heard of a kid that slept in on Christmas, and El, he was sure, would be no exception. But, since she wasn't out dragging him towards the Christmas tree just yet, he decided to get some coffee going. After all, mornings—holiday or not—were for coffee and contemplation.

He filled the kettle with tap water and set it on the stove to boil, then opened the fridge. He was starving, probably due to the fact that he hadn't eaten anything since lunch from the day before. With nothing sounding particularly appealing he poked around, scanning Tupperware for leftovers and raising the covers on old TV dinners. He eventually settled on a square of fudge from the tin of it he'd brought home from the station. Not the healthiest choice, but it sounded better than two-day-old macaroni. Nibbling on the chocolate cube, he leaned against the countertop and waited for the kettle to steam. Suddenly he perked up. He could hear something, a muffled voice that seemed to be chanting.

With his eyebrows raised, he went to El's door and pushed the half-way shut door open quietly. Sitting cross-legged in her bed was El, but she was holding the clock from the wall her lap and counting. "Four-thousand-four-hundred-fifty-eight. Four-thousand-four-hundred-fifty-nine. Four-thousand-four-hundred-sixty." Hopper cleared his throat, and El looked up as quickly as a startled puppy. Her small smile grew into a grin. "Early."

Hopper gave a sleepy nod. "Apparently. But I guess you're the one to decide that, since you . . . took the clock down."

El nodded as well. "Counting until eight. I got tired of sitting out there. Brought clock in here." Even at her most annoying times, Hopper was always entertained by her short explanations.

"How long you been up?"

El looked down at the clock, focusing on the ticking second hand. "Four four eight seven seconds."

"What? Kid, that's gotta be over an hour!" Hopper knew that she was patient, but this was a little over the top. She'd just been counting for an hour and fifteen minutes, waiting for him to wake up? Now he felt guilty.

But E didn't seem surprised. Instead, she got down from her bed and stepped past Hopper. She held the clock out, and a moment later, it floated out of her hand and up to its place on the wall, setting it silently on the nail it hung on. She then entered her room again and began to pull out day clothes from her dresser, but Hopper held up a hand. "Uh, usually you don't have to change out of your pajamas on Christmas. Just another—"

"—weird tradition?" They both smiled. With that new information in her mind she stuffed the jeans back into the drawer and followed Hopper out of the room. She became confused, however, when he turned left, into the kitchen, and not straight ahead to the living room. She hurried after him and grabbed his arm, trying to pull him toward the tree. "Christmas!" she cried, straining under her useless effort.

Hopper continued unfazed over to the kettle, which now featured a spout of steam. He rolled his eyes, hiding his amusement found in her pitiful effort. "Kid, just wait a few minutes," he said over her grunts and strangled words. "I gotta get my coffee; you know that's the most important part of my morning. Remember that one time we didn't have any coffee beans that morning? We don't like that Jim, hm-mm."

El released Hopper's sleeve and stepped back, chest heaving with the exertion. Since that method didn't work, she went with the next best idea she could think of: crossing her arms and making fierce eye contact. Unfortunately, this earned her minimal satisfaction, for

Hopper had his back turned to her most of the time, and when he turned to retrieve the kettle or throw away the coffee filter and saw her pose, he merely smirked and continued ignoring her. That plan was a failure, too. Short of lifting Hopper into the air and making him float onto the couch, it seemed that there was nothing she could do but wait for the frustrating man to drink his coffee.

It surprised her, then, when he turned to her and passed her a mug of her own, however. She looked up to meet his eyes. "I can't have coffee. You said."

Hopper picked up his own mug and leaned back against the countertop again. "Darn straight." He sipped the bitter concoction, and relief flooded his face. "It isn't coffee."

El took a hesitant sip, then suddenly realized what the dark liquid was. "Cocoa?"

Hopper confirmed it with a brief nod. He'd gotten a small tub of the mixture in October, and after quickly learning that El loved the stuff with a passion, he reminded her that it was only a special treat and would be given as such: rarely. To keep it away from El and her tendency to break the rules for objects she liked, he kept the canister hidden in an empty coffee bean package up on the highest shelf in the cupboard. She hadn't uncovered the truth about that Columbian Roast bag yet, which sometimes led him to hide other small objects in coffee bags, including his Twix stash from Halloween and the pop tarts he occasionally bought.

At last Hopper drained his mug and glanced at El, who had finished her beverage within thirty seconds and had spent the past five minutes watching him with wide eyes, which brightened when he sat the mug on the counter. "Now?" she asked hopefully.

Hopper didn't answer immediately, but instead he slowly poured himself another cup and began steeping the coffee grounds. Then he turned to El and exhaled. "I'll get some stuff out of my truck, and then it'll be time. Go sit on your bed while I bring the stuff in. It's a surprise. Surprise means no peeking. Yeah?"

Taking El's immediate retreat to her room as a yes, he slipped on his

boots and grabbed his jacket from the bathroom counter, where he'd dumped it in the middle of the night when he got up to use the bathroom. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he slipped into the jacket, and the sight made him curse under his breath. Somehow he'd missed it last night, but his broken nose was quite obvious, bent awkwardly to the right, and blood was crusted into his facial hair and spotted his uniform collar. Also, the dark ring around his eye somehow seemed more pronounced than it had before. *Great.* Last time he'd gotten a black eye, everybody had called him "coon" for weeks, and something told him the nickname would arise again when his new black eye was spotted.

But he could worry about that later, because he finally had a Christmas to make, and he wasn't going to let anything ruin his day. He scratched at his beard to get some of the mess out, told himself he'd wash it all out later, and stepped out into the freezing cold weather. He still remembered his childhood Christmases in New York. Growing up in an apartment with less square footage than the cabin, his father always did the same thing he was doing, keeping the gifts in the car, as to keep the young ones from easily finding the presents and peeking before Christmas. A wave of nostalgia swept over him. Like father, like son.

He gathered up the three daintily-wrapped packages and the bag of stocking stuffers. That was another major upside to Christmas. He could buy all the candy he wanted, and everybody would assume it was all going into childrens' stockings. Of course, a portion of the sweets was going into the stockings, but Hopper was the original purchaser of the stuff, and he saw no reason why he shouldn't be able to enjoy as much as he felt like. Good old Reese's Pieces; his love for them would be his undoing someday.

Before entering the cabin again, he kicked open the door and made certain there wasn't an eye stealthily watching from the almost-closed door. When he was certain El was being obedient, he stepped inside and shut the door with his foot. "I'll call you when I'm done," he said, making sure to speak loud enough for her to hear. There was no response. He set the gifts on the sofa and retrieved the two sticker-coated stockings, which he carried over to the chair to stuff. The only thing missing was the Santa hat and itchy fake beard his dad always

wore every minute of the week before Christmas. "I know Santa isn't real," he always told young Hopper and his brother and sister when they asked him about the getup. "But I'm still Father Christmas, aren't I? I'm your Father Christmas." Frank Hopper had loved Christmas, and loved his family even more.

With the heavy stockings hung back up and the furniture moved away from the tree as to provide more floor space, Hopper finally eased down to the floor and transferred the presents to under the tree. He admired the familiar sight with a fulfilled smile, and in a moment of long-lost grandeur, he hollered: "Okay, El! Come on out!"

The bedroom door flew open, and El appeared in the doorway, entranced by the sight of the gifts under the tree. It just looked so perfect, so right. Hopper sat on the floor beside the tree, smiling at her with the happiest smile she'd ever seen on him in the year she'd spent with him. She reminded her feet to walk, and she settled down across from Hopper, cross-legged and grinning. He gestured at the three packages: a small, thick one, a thin, square one, and a larger square one. "Take your pick. They're all for you."

El met his merry gaze and watched the reflecting Christmas lights and excitement dance in his eyes. The gratitude she felt at the moment was enough to make her eyes moist. She knew that she hadn't made things easy for Hopper, physically, mentally, or financially, even though she didn't completely understand those aspects. But she also knew that he was trying his hardest to help her and to be a good father, and that fact alone was the greatest gift he could give her. So the giving of three additional, physical gifts was almost too much.

Fingers trembling, she reached for the biggest package, closest to Hopper. It surprised her how light it turned out to be, weighing no more than a pound or two. She shook it tentatively, listening for any evidence of contents.

Hopper chuckled. "Just like Henry. My little brother," he explained. "He would always shake his presents to see if he could figure out what was in them before he opened them. One year my dad played a joke on him and put a couple metal pieces in the box, so when Henry shook it, he thought he broke the thing inside." He still remembered

the horrified face of his brother that morning. Frank only scared the eleven-year-old even more by shouting at him for breaking the toy inside, and he made the boy open the gift, warning he'd have to pay his father for the damage. It had taken Henry twice as long as it should've to pry the top off the box, and he almost cried when he found a book and a handful of nuts and bolts inside. It was one of Hopper's favorite memories.

El ran her finger along the edge of the thin-walled, solid-white box topped with a bright red bow until she found the tape securing the top, which she cut with her fingernail. She flipped the top half off and stared into the eyes of the pink cartoon rabbit wearing a Santa hat imprinted onto a dark fabric. She grasped the fabric, which felt warm and comfortable, and pulled it from the box. It was a hand-knitted sweater, and underneath the main decal was a script that read "Hoppy Holidays!" And below the sweater rested a pair of pink bunny slippers with thick fur layering the inside.

She squealed. She couldn't help it; she was just so happy. She felt the pink velvet covering the outside of the slipper, the little pink-and-white ears on the top and mini black buttons of eyes. And the fur inside felt like a cloud, it was so soft.

She held one of the slippers out for Hopper to pet. "You like 'em? I was going to just get slippers, since your feet get cold all the time, but they had this whole matching set. The sweater might be a bit baggy, though."

With Hopper's help, she slid her feet into the slippers, laughing and twitching from the tickly feeling of the fur stroking the bottoms of her feet, and the sweater kept her nice and toasty. They were going to become permanent accessories.

The next gift El picked was the small thick one. It was more flexible than the sweater/slipper box, and it bent a little when she picked it up. It was also wrapped, covered in blue paper with snowflakes on it. "Just find the edge and tear the paper," Hopper instructed, seeing her struggle to pull the tape away.

Doing as told, she found the beginning of the paper and viciously tore the paper away. Hiding away, she discovered a book: *The Hobbit*.

Enthralled by the captivating cover art she flipped the book open to find many pages of tiny lettering and dozens of unfamiliar words. She glanced up at Hopper, a remembering look in her eyes. "Hobbit. Dustin likes The Hobbit."

Hopper nodded. "Never met a prepubescent male that didn't. Now that book is pretty complicated word-wise and all, but if you like it, I can get you the other Lord of the Rings books."

The final present under the tree turned out to be El's favorite gift of the morning: a full thirty-six pack of colored pencils. She gasped aloud when she removed the green wrapping paper and saw all of the variously-colored pencils, and immediately she began to think of all the things she draw with them. The lights in her room. Deer, which she saw outside all the time in the warmer months. The flowers that grew around the fallen trees in the forest. Heck, she could even draw her Eggo boxes now. Endless opportunities could now sit in her hand, no longer confined to the gray graphite of the number two pencil.

El scooted up next to Hopper and threw her arms around him, catching him completely off-guard. She simply hugged him, no words necessary or even available to describe her gratitude. And after a moment, a heavy arm came up and hugged her tightly back.

When El pulled away at last, Hopper ducked his head and sniffled thickly. "Bleeding again?" El asked, referring to his broken nose.

"Uh . . . yeah, yeah, that's it. Go grab me a tissue, would you?"

She quickly did as told, and Hopper muttered his thanks before taking the tissue. It was strange, though: after he'd used it and went to pocket it, El saw no trace of blood on the spent tissue.

At last Hopper looked up at her, matching her look of satisfaction. "Well, uh, I guess that's everything. You want to float those stockings over here?"

"Not yet!" Her sudden outburst surprised Hopper. She stood up and made a "one-minute" gesture, then took off into her room, leaving behind a bewildered Hopper. He only grew more confused when he heard a series of subdued thumps, and he was about to come after

the girl when she came back out, carrying something behind her back and smiling from ear to ear. She approached Hopper, then knelt down and proudly presented him with . . . an Eggo box. He stared at it for a moment, then looked to El for an explanation.

"Take it," she urged.

Hopper complied. The box had to have been empty, it was so light. Upon further inspection he found the top flap to be sealed shut with several layers of tape. "What's this?" He almost expected it to be some kind of joke related to her monstrous consumption of the waffle brand.

El patted the box. "Christmas present."

"For me? I said I didn't want anything."

"I wanted you to have something. Open it." She gave him some room and sat down, watching him expectantly.

It was strange; this was his first time opening a Christmas gift in years. Sure, Diane had given him gifts sometimes, but those types of gifts were different than the ones made by the pre-teen girl you'd adopted just weeks before and had been locked in a lab as a test subject for the first twelve years of her life. Call it a sentimental value difference. Shaking those thoughts from his mind, he attempted to pry open the box, but soon resorted to his pocketknife. "Solid seal," he grunted as he sawed through the sticky plastic. Finally the flap came loose, and after a quick pause, he lifted the cardboard and reached inside. His fingers grasped air at first, but he finally found what felt like a sheet of paper, rolled up like a scroll. He tenderly pulled it out of the box, taking care to avoid the tape. It was a paper. And unrolling it revealed a drawing. A drawing . . . of him.

It was a rough pencil sketch of his face and upper torso, clearly drawn by an inexperienced artist. The eyes were circles inside of circles, misshapen and unsymmetrical. His nose's current state was straighter than the one in the sketch. One ear was oddly larger than the other, and it was impossible to tell apart his lips from his facial hair. And Hopper had never seen a more beautiful picture in his life.

That isn't to say that it looked great. Hold it up next to the Mona Lisa and it was clear which piece would win the blue ribbon. But the kindness behind the picture, the effort that was put into it; that was the most impactful aspect of the work.

Hopper's grip on the paper tightened, and he couldn't hide the tears any longer. They spilled from his eyes, warping his vision, and he did nothing to hide them. He just couldn't take his eyes off of the picture. *She really does care*, Hopper realized in the back of his mind.

El became alarmed at the sudden meltdown, unsure of what had caused Hopper's tears. She went to his side and put a gentle hand on his arm. "Okay?" she breathed, concern and uneasiness spreading across her face.

Hopper released a strangled laugh. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm . . . I've never been better, kid. Never been better." Carefully he set the paper down on the Eggo box, and with both hands he enveloped the girl, drawing her close. And a moment later, he felt her arms wrap around his neck and gently hug him back. Hopper closed his eyes, sniffing occasionally. "Merry Christmas, kid."

El sat at the kitchen table, drawing the wreath hanging next to the back door. It was such a powerful feeling, being able to capture the very colors of objects. Now instead of just drawing a fuzzy circle, she could draw the leaves in their ever-different shades of green, she could speckle cherry-red dots around to represent the berries. If she wanted she could shade in the spiky cones with brown and streaks of black to define them as pinecones. With the pencils at hand, nothing felt impossible.

Outside, Hopper was loading chopped wood into the back of his truck, though he wouldn't give the reason why. She'd confronted him during both of his breaks when he came inside for coffee and to warm his hands near the furnace, and both times he'd merely said, "Why not?"

But she was cutting him some slack, for fear of accidentally setting him off again. He was certainly embarrassed about his previous scene from the morning, and he didn't seem all too keen on relating what it

specifically was that had snapped him earlier. The only information he would provide was that it was not her fault in any way, but his reassurances did little to, well, reassure.

After Hopper had gotten a hold of himself, he and El had explored the contents of their stockings, which had contained excessive amounts of sweets and other unhealthy goods. Hopper had mentioned that the stockings "had always been the best part of his Christmases, even better than the presents." Following the candy-sampling-fest, Hopper had made an extravagant holiday-themed breakfast of Eggos topped with whipped cream and red and green M&Ms, dusted with cinnamon. Then they had settled down on the sofa and Hopper began to read *The Hobbit* aloud, like he'd done in the past to help her go to sleep. Then, of course, he'd primarily read Dr. Seuss and Dick and Jane books from a box containing Sara's old toys, and *The Hobbit* was a pleasing upgrade.

About two hours into their reading escapade, Hopper had declared that if he had to read another word of the book out loud, he'd lose his voice, and so they took a break from the book with the promise of a handful of chapters at bedtime. Then they'd split apart to perform their own independent pastimes: El went to draw while snuggled up in her sweater and slippers, and Hopper had gone to tend to his bloodstained clothing and face. After getting himself all cleaned up, they took care of the chores, made lunch, and watched TV. It was well into the afternoon when Hopper had abruptly gotten up after glancing at the clock, which read 3:15, and declared he had some "outside business" to take care of. Outside he'd been for the past hour, chopping up tree limbs and tossing them into his truck while El looked on from the kitchen window, doodling and waiting for him to come back inside.

El was staring off into the distant woods, nibbling the back end of her forest green pencil, when the front door slammed shut, making her jump. There stood Hopper, his face rosy and snow-dusted, and his truck keys in hand. "Want to go out for a ride in the snow?" he asked with a good-natured smirk.

"Really?" El couldn't believe it. It would be the first time going back out into the world—with Hopper's authorization—in almost an entire year. She wondered if she would still recognize everything, or if it all

had changed, like she herself had. "Where?"

Hopper scratched the back of his head, looking sheepish. "I, uh . . . I gotta stay by a phone tonight, in case something happens at work and I have to go help. I've got a phone at my trailer, but since we can't get phone lines way out here . . . We'll stay there tonight. I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier. It's nicer than this place, though, so uh, that's a plus." Honestly, that commitment had slipped his mind until he'd realized how late in the afternoon it was, and because the heater in the trailer was notorious for breaking down in the winter weather, he knew that firewood was going to be an essential. He really had no excuse for not telling her the few times she'd inquired when he came inside to warm up, other than the fact that he didn't have time to explain and answer her questions. It was pathetic reasoning, but it was what it was, and he couldn't change that fact. He regretted it, having to spring the news so suddenly, and he knew it was his fault. "I'll let you call Mike later tonight, too. The kid's been dying to tell you Merry Christmas." His lazy-yet-effective kind of justification.

If El hadn't been excited before, she was ecstatic now. She obviously had a million questions, which he assured her he would answer as soon as they were in the truck, but right then, they needed to get a move on. Hopper knew that the phone was already ringing off the hook, but he also knew that most of the calls he'd be able to deal with in a matter of sentences, and there was a high likelihood he wouldn't have to go anywhere for the rest of Christmas night. "Get everything you need, we won't be back until tomorrow afternoon, and I'm not the late-night-run kind of guy," Hopper said brusquely, stepping into the kitchen and gathering food to take with them.

There wasn't much El was determined to bring, just pajamas, her new sweater and slippers, her drawing supplies, and *The Hobbit* book, which made Hopper quite thankful she wasn't like most of the other women he knew, who had to bring an entire wardrobe and chest for a one-night outing. On her way out the door, however, El spotted the small box she'd taken from Hopper's hands the night before, still untouched atop the counter behind the flour jar. What was inside of the box? El reached over and slid it out from the unintentional hiding place. She refused to open the box, though. She did have trouble staying within the confines of the rules, but she never went against

her morals, and digging through someone's private property was a big no-no in her book. It was conflicting; should she take it with her, just in case Hopper needed it, or would it be better to leave it? He hadn't expressed any specific care for the package throughout the day, never seemed concerned about its whereabouts. On the other hand, maybe it was just a matter of timing, and it would become vital to Hopper when certain parameters were reached. Hearing Hopper call impatiently from the truck, she gave the package a final uncertain look . . .

And set it on the table and hurried out the front door, throwing the locks with her telekinesis. And there it would sit for several hours, resting in the light given off by the overhead lamp just above it, waiting for opportunity to seize Hopper at just the wrong time—or maybe, it would be just right.

End of part 1

Author's Note

So we finally got to give El her first Christmas, and I think Hopper would agree with me that it was a stunning success! A little feely, maybe I should've warned you all, but good! I'm telling you, for a story that was supposed to have only been three chapters, the plot just keeps getting better and better, and I mean that even in my perspective! As some of you may know, we writers don't ever have a story completely planned in our heads or on paper: it changes as we go as we think of better (or worse) twists and details, and we never know how it'll end until it's finally done. And I gotta say, I'm liking the way this is going! I promise you all, though, that I am not going to extend this story any further. Seriously, I need to stop adding more chapters and just write what I had originally planned to write instead of writing in more pathetic jokes and platonic fluff (see what I did there, musicnlyrics?). So yes, the final chapter will be released soon, I promise! I'll try to get it up in two days, but it *may* take a bit longer. I SWEAR I WILL COMPLETE THIS STORY BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR. It cannot extend past that, or I will be destroyed inside. Merry Christmas again, readers! I love every one of you, and I hope you have/had an amazing Christmas!

QUICK THING I WROTE WHILE WRITING A SCENE:

Just to clear things up: Hopper's scene that's triggered by El's drawing is NOT solely based on the drawing itself, or even the emotions he felt over it. If you remember from the first chapter, he thought to himself that he needed to get a grip before he broke down in front of somebody. Why did he say that? Because of his emotions that were running high from major events that he experienced. The incident from before the first chapter, his feelings for Joyce, and now the sudden gesture of kindness presented by El. So if you thought that his tears over the drawing were an overreaction, you'd be dead-on. But it isn't just the drawing. It's the combination of bottled-up feelings that finally erupted. Make sense?

6. Chapter 5 pt 2

IS THIS STORY EVER GOING TO END?! Hey there, everybody! I'm back with the final part of the final chapter—wait, what's that? This ISN'T the last part of the last chapter?! There's still one more part to go?! Yes, that's right. I went on a mad writing spree as soon as I had the opportunity (yesterday) and I was so sure I was going to finish the story! 7,000 words later, I still wasn't done. I'm ALMOST done with the last part, I promise! I'll release it tomorrow, I'm thinking. A good way to start the 2018, right? Seeing as I have little other choice,

yes

yes, it is.

In all honesty, El wasn't too keen on the idea of staying at Hopper's trailer. Hopper hadn't ever explained why he kept it off-limits, even though he occasionally talked about how much nicer it was than the little cabin. According to him, it boasted a heater and an air conditioning unit, a fireplace, better furniture, and a TV several inches bigger than the one El watched. Yet despite how great it sounded, he refused to take her, and he became anxious whenever she mentioned it. Sometimes she wondered if something bad had happened there, and he was afraid of coming face-to-face with whatever it was that had caused it, though he never confirmed her theory. Whatever the reason was, it seemed unsettling enough to make her never want to see Hopper's other home for as long as she lived. And pulling up to the pitch-dark lot that the trailer rested on didn't make her feel any better.

The only light was provided by the truck's headlights and the moon, both of which did little to illuminate the area surrounding the trailer. After Hopper shut the truck off and the two front-facing beams disappeared, El could barely make out featureless silhouettes of trees, mountains, and a looming, oblong box—the trailer. Hopper, noticing her uneasiness, reached down and pulled his department-issue flashlight from the side of his seat, then clicked it on and offered it to her. El took the light with a smile, and the two exited the truck,

carefully treading to the cheap, rickety porch. The cold squirmed through their jackets and the steady wind bit at their noses, turning each of their faces bright red in a matter of seconds.

Hopper set down the armful of logs he'd retrieved from the truck and managed to unlock the trailer's front entrance in less than thirty seconds, still quite difficult with his shaking hands, but using the flashlight beam to his advantage. El didn't know what to expect inside, and she couldn't help but cower behind a confused Hopper as he swung the door open. She dutifully followed him as he stepped inside and he felt for the light switch, though hesitant at first. She was almost startled to find an average, homely interior, not at all what she had expected to find. The worst aspect of the place was the slight rotting odor that didn't seem to have a specific source, but it was an easily-tolerated smell.

Hopper immediately made a beeline for the fireplace and began building a fire. It couldn't have been warmer than forty-five degrees, even inside the insulated structure. Now, as he struggled to light a match with his bare, half-frozen hands, he wished he'd simply paid up the \$120 to get the heating unit repaired. It had broken two weeks before he'd taken El in, and with the added expenses of Eggos and a nearly doubled electric bill combined with his infrequent visits to the trailer, he hadn't deemed the repair worth the money. Technically, it still ran; it just didn't put out enough heat to compensate for the amount of oil it used and it didn't always start in cold weather. But he soon struck a flame, and within minutes a fire was blazing away, its heat forcing out the cold.

Once they had thawed themselves out, they made a few more trips out to the truck to bring in the other items they'd brought along. They were just pulling out the grocery bags containing Hopper's change of clothes and personal belongings when the phone began to ring, the sound reverberating throughout the empty forest. Hopper groaned. "I gotta take that. Bring in as much as you can? Please?" At El's nod, he turned and hurried inside, and a moment later, the ringing ceased.

El focused on the remaining items. There wasn't much, just Hopper's belongings and some more firewood, along with what was left of the eggnog inside two large mason jars. The logs were fairly heavy for

her, and they always gave her splinters, so she would leave those for Hopper, and the rest she could take in two trips. Hopper's items were a piece of cake, and he'd gestured towards the bedroom by the kitchen when she silently showed the bags to him while he frustratedly spoke into the receiver. The bedroom was a mess; the bed wasn't made, clothes were strewn about the floor, and items ranging from teacups to beer cans to coins littered the two nightstands that sat against the back wall on either side of the bed. There was a single lamp that offered the only light, and it cast a strange shadow due to the pair of underpants that hung haphazardly from the crooked lampshade. Disgusted, El tossed the bags onto the crumpled and stained white sheets and went back to the truck.

This time on her way back inside, she noticed a drawing pinned to the refrigerator door with magnets. It was clearly drawn by a child, or at least by someone with poorer art skills than herself. It portrayed what appeared to be a man and woman holding hands with a yellow-haired girl, and a large gray building sat directly behind the trio. She turned to ask Hopper, but he had taken a seat with his back to the kitchen and was still arguing into the phone. El reached up and tugged the drawing out from under the magnets, examining the picture closer and looking for a name to put on the artist. Suddenly, Hopper slammed the phone down and abruptly stood, rubbing his forehead with a shaking hand and muttering a stream of oaths under his breath. He froze, however, when his eyes stumbled across the kitchen, where El was holding up one of Sara's drawings and returning his startled stare. Neither one spoke.

"Who drew this?" El finally asked, the uncomfortable situation getting through her at last.

Hopper didn't answer right away; he was beguiled by the sight of his new daughter holding a belonging of Sara's. It sent a pang through his heart and a question to his mind: was he using El as a replacement, to fill the gap Sara's absence left? No, of course not. He had taken El in because he cared about people and their wellbeing, not because he couldn't get over a lost loved one. But Sara had absolutely no influence on his decisions? Maybe his fatherly side sometimes showed through, especially since El was only a little girl, too. He tried to make himself refuse the idea, but now it was

engraved in his brain. "Ah . . . Sara did. Remember her?" Oh, great. He was getting choked up for the *second time that day*. What on earth was wrong with him?

Fortunately, El didn't seem to notice the crack in his voice. She pointed to the building in the picture. "What's that?"

The picture was seven and a half years old, but Hopper knew exactly what it was. Heck, he hadn't forgotten a thing about it, or anything else of Sara's. She was always there with him, for better or for worse. "It's called the Empire State Building. We lived four streets away from it when we lived in New York." He'd told El about many of his New York detective days—the good ones, that is. "We went there once. Just once. Sara wanted to see what all the fuss about it was, so I took a sick day and Diane and me took her to look around. Tourists everywhere, like a real sea of faces. Sara loved the view, the furniture, the paintings on the walls—Heh, everything about it. She drew that an hour after we got home."

He chuckled at the memory of his almost-six-year-old daughter bursting into his home office yelling, "It's the Entire's Fate, Daddy! See, I made it!" And he had pulled her into his lap, about to reprimand her for entering the office while he was working, but her excitement had been contagious. He was too busy laughing with her, and he finally wheezed out, "It sure is, sweetie. Go hang it up on the fridge so Daddy can always see it when he gets hungry: all the time!" And there it sat for over six months, before Sara began falling ill and the drawing was forgotten. Hopper didn't recall ever hanging up the drawing, meaning he'd probably done so during one of his drunken stupors, but he never had the heart to remove any of the mementos that lay aimlessly around the trailer.

Hopper shook his head, unsuccessfully clearing his mind. "Be right back," he murmured, and he slipped out the front door. Once behind the privacy of the truck he bent down and vomited. There he stood, hands on his knees and quivering violently, and he remained so for a long minute, just waiting. Waiting for the pain to go away. Waiting to forget the memories that haunted him. Waiting for the demons to leave him be, the ones that hadn't left him alone for over a decade. Why was he cursed no matter where he was, no matter what he did? His years in Vietnam had given him PTSD. The time spent on the

New York Police Department made him see things that could never be unseen. Losing his daughter, and his wife soon after, had caused him so much grief and guilt, he hardly knew what to do with himself. What had he done to deserve one tragedy after another?

At last he wiped the sweat from his forehead, spat into the tainted snow, and looked towards the trailer, where he saw El waiting at the front door. She didn't appear to have seen his panic attack, but there was no doubt that she was aware something was troubling him. He could see it in her eyes, her body language when they were around each other. She was uncomfortable; like she was afraid she might set him off with one wrong move or word. And it hurt. Hopper had been the same way with her for the first several months of his taking her in, and the fear of unintentionally wounding her had arisen again after his adoption of her. He was very aware of how hard it was to be normal around an unpredictable person, and it ached to see his own daughter have to deal with him in that way.

He was determined to relieve El, and with that newfound resolve, he gathered the remaining firewood and marched back inside, reentering his acting mindset that had earned his success as a detective. "Sorry 'bout that, kid," he said as he approached El. "Think I had some bad milk earlier, my stomach's been killing me all afternoon. It should be better now. Should we watch some TV, or read for a while?"

"Read? Please?" El was taken aback by his sudden mood change, but she didn't appear to take it negatively. Maybe it was just her wishful thinking, but whatever it was, it seemed to be working.

"I'd like nothing better."

It was an enjoyable time after Hopper's incident. They read a few chapters of *The Hobbit*, and then they played *Go Fish*. Hopper remembered the many rounds of the card game he'd played with Sara, and it struck him that it could be a great activity for him and El, both to reduce the time spent in front of a television and to bond through. Sure enough, the theatrics that came so naturally through his paternal side had El giggling away, and soon the two were having more fun than a carnival could provide. It didn't take long for the

exhaustion to set in, so they flopped down on the couch and switched on the television to watch "It's a Wonderful Life", a favorite of Hoppers. El didn't understand many parts of the movie, which meant plenty of explaining from Hopper, but didn't mind it. He took pride in teaching her as much as he could, particularly because it was the one thing that made him feel like he was doing a halfway-decent job at parenting.

As the night progressed, the temperature steadily dropped, and soon the cold began to rival the fire that was burning away. By some stroke of luck, Hopper managed to get the heater running, though it did make some disturbing groans when it finally started. It didn't offer much heat, but combined with the fire and a space heater found in the spare bedroom, the living area maintained a comfortable seventy degrees. Then, with the Christmas music radio station creating a festive background, Hopper broke out the cocoa and coffee, heated up some leftover ham and mashed potatoes, and had their Christmas dinner—minimalist style.

9:30 wasn't far off when Hopper heard something. It was Christmas music, but it wasn't the Kenny Rodgers' rendition of Carol of the Bells playing on the radio, and it wasn't backed by white noise. Instead, he heard the muffled, mournful lyrics of Ringing the Bells for Jim—coming from the other side of the front door. What on earth were carolers doing way out in the middle of nowhere, twenty minutes away from a paved road? Or was it even carolers? Hopper's stomach began to churn again, and he looked over at El, who had frozen in place as well. The poor girl looked terrified, and he guessed the same unsettling thoughts were coursing through her, too. He frantically pointed to the hallway, and she seemed to get the message. She got up from the couch and disappeared into one of the back rooms, punctuated by a soft thud of a door shutting.

Hopper snatched up his gun from the top of the fridge hid in his bedroom, crouched down on the far side of the bed. Maybe it was just carolers, and they would go away when nobody responded. But after the singing ceased, the doorbell began to ring. While it certainly made Hopper's heart rate increase, it was a slight comfort. For if it was indeed Brenner and his crew, they probably wouldn't be so patient, and would instead resort to breaking the door down or

something of the like. Over the span of two minutes, however, the doorbell chimed six times, making it clear that whoever it was that was out there wasn't planning on leaving until they'd seen Hopper.

Gun in hand, he cautiously approached the door. It was too dark to see anything through the peephole, and the outdoor light had burned out long ago. He flipped the deadbolts one by one, being as quiet as he could. Then, gripping the knob with pale fingers and bracing the door with his right foot to prevent it from opening much further than an inch, he cracked the door open. "What do you want?" he spat, his pulse racing and trigger finger tightening.

"Geez, took you long enough."

"Shut up, he's the chief!"

"At this point I don't even care; my toes are literally going to fall off."

The bickering voices where the last ones he'd expected to hear outside his door. He stood there for a moment, dumbfounded, then moved his foot and swung the door all the way open. There stood Dustin and Lucas, as well as Mike, Will, Max, Nancy, Jonathan, and Joyce, all red-nosed and pale. Nancy and the three Byers smiled up at him and said in unison, "Merry Christmas!" Mike attempted to peer inside the trailer over everyone's heads, no doubt looking for El. Max and Lucas waved awkwardly, and Dustin grumbled his season's greetings.

Hopper quickly hid his gun hand behind his back, and his face burned with embarrassment. "Uh—yeah, Merry Christmas. What's, uh, all of this? Joyce?"

Joyce smiled weakly, as if she wasn't sure how he'd react. "Ah, well. W-we were just out caroling, and you know. You were right on the way. Could we come in? Please?"

"Yeah, yeah! Sorry." He hastily moved back and uneasily waved them inside. He shut the door and grabbed Joyce's elbow and tugged her into the kitchen. "Joyce, I told you—"

"I know, I know. It didn't . . . feel right, though. And the boys, they

were so upset about not getting to see Jane. I'm so, so sorry for defying you like this." And there was something about the way she said it that made Hopper honestly believe her. "But I think this was the right thing to do. And I still feel that way. We made sure we weren't followed out here, we were extra careful. And what happened to your face? You look like you got in a fight with a bear!"

Hopper didn't know what to think. He was upset that she had come out here—with all the kids, for that matter—and he couldn't shake the feeling that maybe they had been followed . . . but at the same time, it was great to see them. He hadn't been against celebrating Christmas with Joyce and the Party, he was against the threat posed by doing so. And there was nothing he could do about anything now, so he might as well enjoy the Christmas he'd secretly hoped for. And it was good that El wouldn't have to spend Christmas with just one person; a Christmas that included dear friends was always more fun than celebrating with a toughened, middle-aged police chief with anxiety and grief disorders.

"Hey. Mr. Totally-Unfestive." Max waved to get Hopper's attention. "Where should I put this stuff—" she held up a bag containing wrapped gifts—"since you don't have a tree. Or any other decorations. Or anything Christmas-related."

Hopper raised his eyebrows at her cool tone. Few kids had the audacity to speak like that to any police officer, especially the chief. Unless they were minutes from being arrested, or already were. "Doesn't matter. And I wasn't expecting guests tonight, so pardon the lack of festivities."

Just as he was about to chew Joyce out about the importance of listening to what he said, a soft voice somehow halted every loud conversation going on. "Mike?"

The said boy slowly turned in a way that unconsciously struck Hopper as overly-dramatic. There stood El, wrapped tightly in a wool blanket and shocked to see the much-fuller trailer. "El!" Mike rushed over and gave her a tight hug. Both of their joyous faces reminded Hopper of how much they really did care for each other, and he felt a bit guilty for having wanted them kept apart. The rest of the boys gathered around the pair, all talking at once and animatedly

gesturing wildly about. Jonathan and Nancy hung back, watching the reuniting of one of the sweetest couples they'd ever seen.

Hopper was startled out of his trance when he noticed Joyce staring at him out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face her, and surprisingly, she didn't look away. "Are you mad?" she asked simply. "At me or them? It was all my idea, so you can blame me for everything—"

"Joyce." He cut her off in a quiet tone, and he thought. He thought as he looked into her kind eyes, he thought as he watched his daughter surrounded by the people she most cared about. "No," he finally said. "I'm not mad. Actually . . ." He smiled. "This is perfect."

After everyone had settled down, Max had declared that it was pathetic they were just sitting around when it was Christmas, and that it was time to get the party started.

"Party?" Hopper had laughed. "Yeah. Right. With what? All I got is a box of Eggos, some water, and a case of Schlitz. If you want to turn up the radio and pretend there's a disco ball on the ceiling, be my guest."

But Max had only smirked and said, "You got it." She cranked up the volume on the old radio and, reaching into her Nirvana backpack, set a plate of store-bought cookies on the counter, along with a thermos of cocoa. She then turned to the other kids and nodded, who promptly nodded back. One by one, they each took off their backpacks and pulled out some little snack or beverage, and soon there was a good assortment of foods and drinks. Dustin had poured his entire backpack out, which was filled to the brim with granola bars, candy, individually-wrapped baked goods, and a variety of other edibles. "I get hungry when I go out to sing for hours on end," he'd argued when the others poked fun at him.

"But you knew we weren't actually going caroling!" Mike said, still standing next to El.

"Well, I had to look the part, didn't I?" he retorted. "Besides, I don't know why you're blaming me, here. I'm supplying half of this totally-

last-minute party!"

Mike had no response to that, and everyone—including El—had to laugh, causing the boy to blush and everyone to laugh even more.

It blew Hopper away to see how much of a celebration it was, inside his undecorated little trailer. Some of the kids—including Max and Lucas, who looked like he'd rather have been anywhere else—had started a dance-off, while the others sat around and talked, mostly with El. She was clearly excited to see everyone, and she hadn't moved more than a foot away from Mike. The two were glued together, which Hopper wasn't crazy about, but he let it slide temporarily.

Mike had a million questions, and El didn't seem to mind at all. "So what do you do all day when Chief Hopper's at work? Does he homeschool you? When's he gonna let you come and visit me? Did you do anything special for Christmas? Hey, how come you don't call me? There's a phone right there, I'll write my phone number down. You have to call sometime after 4:30, 'cause of school, or call on the weekends. And I'm on break for another two weeks, so I'll probably be home all the time."

Eventually Dustin stepped in and reprimanded him for "being super annoying," even though El said over and over that it was okay. "Not the best way to get a girl to like you, man," he'd said. El responded with, "I already like him," and Mike went red again.

El was intrigued by the lists of gifts the boys had received for Christmas. They had to describe everything to her, but of course they didn't care, especially when they got to their new video games.

". . . And Mike was so sure he was getting a Nintendo, and it turned out it was just Monopoly!" Will laughed. Mike was now the laughingstock of the group because of his insistence that he was getting the console and the actual turnout of the gift.

Mike crossed his arms. "It isn't funny, guys. I can't believe my mom got me that stupid game when she knows I like Dungeons and Dragons more than anything!"

"Yeah, maybe she's trying to *unhook* you from it," Dustin offered.

"Why would she do that? It's better than video games."

"At our level of seriousness? Even I can see where she's coming from. I don't agree with her, don't get that idea. But I can see where she's coming from."

And just like that, the Party's respect for Dustin decreased a fraction.

Hopper and Joyce looked on through the back window from their place on the back porch. It was freezing outside, but both had coats and a thick blanket wrapped around them. One of the few perks of his trailer was the view from the back porch, no matter the time of day or season. Currently the meager moonlight glinted off of the silvery water, and a few chunks of floating ice glowed like dying lanterns. Snow was piled around the edges of the water, and the barren trees cast strange, rippling shadows. Tonight was a beautifully-eerie night, one of Hopper's favorites. The pile of trash bags from his Christmas Eve cleaning extravaganza sat in a large pile at the far end of the porch, their glimmering white color unfortunately prominent against the darkness.

The two were simply enjoying each other's company and chatting about work, family, Christmas, and just about anything else. These social meet-ups were rare, with Hopper always either working or caring for El, so when they did get the opportunity to be together, they talked as if they were long-lost friends catching up on each other's lives. "So you don't really live here anymore?"

"Nah. The cabin's much more . . . desolate. That's the word. Hardly anybody even knows it exists, so it's pretty ideal for hiding people."

Joyce chuckled. "Good thing you were here tonight, then."

"Yeah, and too bad I didn't get any more decorations from Melvald for here. Should've, though. Guy's been weirdly nice to me the past few weeks." He frowned. "Actually, I meant to ask you last time I saw you if he'd been acting odd lately. He isn't dying or something, is he?"

"Of course not! He, uh . . ." Joyce seemed hesitant to finish her

sentence. "He feels bad for you, Hop. With your divorce, and losing Sara. His son died, oh, twenty years ago, and he knows what a lonely Christmas feels like."

Hopper didn't know how to respond. It was too bad he couldn't tell the poor man the truth, about how this year's Christmas was one of the least lonely ones he'd had in a long time. Maybe he could explain that he'd had met up with the Byer family, or he could pull the same lie he'd told his partners, about family coming into town. Whatever it took to get himself off of the pity list, because he was on plenty of those. Until he handed those people citations and parking tickets, that is.

"And that incident from earlier this month, everyone's been pretty sympathetic to the police after that."

"Everyone's been pretty sympathetic to everyone since that." But she was right; people had been leaving meals and cards at the station since that fateful night. It probably had something to do with the fact that everybody knew everybody, so it was more a gesture of formal politeness, but it was still appreciated.

It had been the biggest happening in Hawkins since the town's very founding. A man, already wanted in several states for at least twelve murders, had been on the run for two years, and unfortunately, Indiana had been right in his warpath. Since his sighting in Nashville, Federal agents had been swarming the surrounding cities, including Hawkins. Just a week later, as the FBI was beginning to filter out, a gas station was broken into, and following the trail left behind, Larry Eyler was found. A helicopter had spotted him in an urban alleyway, but before the authorities could arrive at the scene, he'd ducked into a nearby house—one that was not unoccupied. A 911 call was made from the home, but it was never finished. The woman calling had suddenly fallen silent, and a moment later, Eyler had picked up the phone. He'd demanded the police to let him go, or else there'd be "fatal consequences."

The police acted quickly by storming the house and, after a five-hour-long firefight, Eyler exited the house in handcuffs. Unfortunately, while no officers had lost their lives and only five had been injured, the same could not be said for the family that had owned the house.

One large body bag and two soul-crushingly small ones had exited the scene and loaded onto the ambulances while Hopper could do nothing but watch. That was one reason why he'd left the NYPD; so he'd have fewer kid-related cases. They wreaked havoc on him, as it did on many other officers with children. And after Sara had passed away, dealing with child cases became too much, and he'd left the force. He loved being a cop, however, so he'd gone to a small town—Hawkins—which had fit him perfectly, right up until that fateful day.

Joyce put a hand on his shoulder. "I know it hurts a lot more than you let on Hop. You don't have to pretend around me."

"I'm not very good at pretending anymore, apparently. Poor kid's seen me cry way too many times today. Now she probably thinks I'm going crazy." He rubbed his forehead as his incessant headache began to pound again. Just thinking about traumatic events triggered the correlated stress nowadays.

"If I were her, I'd appreciate your honesty." Joyce could always find some sunbeam poking through the blanket of thunderclouds he called his life.

Hopper gave a sad snort of laughter. "Honesty. Yup, that's all I've shown. You realize I lie about every one of those . . . scenes, or whatever you want to call them?"

"That isn't to say you can't change. She loves you, and she wants to know everything about you. Doesn't she?"

Judging by her inquisitiveness, Hopper supposed that was a fair statement. "Indisputably. The kid's been through enough, Joyce. She needs help, not my problems weighing on her shoulders."

"I'm not saying you should tell her everything. But if you come home with a black eye and a smashed-up face, it doesn't hurt to tell her you had to break up a fight, or whatever it is. She's smart enough to know you didn't really walk into a door, and she'd just worry more because she knows you aren't telling the truth. My boys are like that—Jonathan especially. Just be honest. Who knows, maybe she'll start opening up to you after she sees you trust her enough to tell her everything about you, the good and bad stuff. Just have a little faith."

Author's Note

AAAHHHH THIS CHAPTER! I love this chapter! I love it, I love it, I love it! Except for the ending, which doesn't really close, I know. I just had to find an appropriate spot to split this chapter, and this was, unfortunately, the only decent stop. Sorry. My only regret is that I kind of rushed through it, and while it's still written okay (I think), I didn't get to include all of the minor details I'd hoped to. For instance, I really wanted to write more about the kids/Party's interactions with El. Especially Dustin. I love that kid to bits, he's so weird and hilarious. Every scene that includes him speaking make me laugh out loud, so I don't know what that says about my sense of humor (I think I said that in a previous A/N, didn't I?). And yay, more Joyce/Hopper stuff! Those two are just made for each other, despite how incredibly different they are. Well, I'm keeping this brief so I can finish that darn third part before midnight (MST). See you all soon!

7. Chapter 5 pt 3

Finally, the last chapter!

The party was starting to die down, and it probably had something to do with the fact that it was pushing eleven o'clock. El and Hopper had opened their gifts, which had been one of the most enjoyable events of the day. Hopper had gotten a card from Mike, saying he appreciated everything he was doing for El and a Jim Croce album from Jonathan and Will. From Joyce he'd received a small pendant that contained a photograph of the three Byers. He'd teared up for what must've been the thousandth time that day, but he managed to not cry in front of the group of kids and his dear friend.

El had gotten a bundle of gifts from that the Party had purchased together, including some Star Wars action figures, a VHS tape of Star Wars, and a Rubik's cube, all of which she fell in love with instantly. Joyce had remembered Hopper mentioning once that she loved to draw, so, with the help of Will, they had picked out a special brand of drawing paper and a set of charcoal drawing pencils. The moment she opened the package, she gasped and began drawing with them immediately. When Hopper gently reminded her to say thank you, she got up and hugged Joyce, causing everyone to chuckle and "aw."

Hopper was kicking himself for not thinking to bring Joyce's gift with him, though Joyce reminded him that he had no idea he would see her that night. Still, Hopper felt bad, and, remembering his determination from the day before to find the perfect gift for her, he decided to go back to the cabin—a twenty-minute drive in good, visible weather—to retrieve her gift.

Joyce being Joyce, she immediately refused. "It has to be single digits out there. Besides." She lowered her voice. "It'd be much sweeter if we weren't babysitting an entire herd of kids."

"You've got a point." Hopper thought for a moment, then nodded towards Jonathan. "Think you and your girlfriend can handle a few kids for an hour?"

"It's not like that," Nancy protested. "I'm only here because my mom thought we were actually going caroling, and she made me chaperone Mike."

Mike jumped to his feet. "Liar! You asked me if I thought Jonathan would come with us, and you got that big, dreamy smile on your face when I told you he was."

"I-I never asked you anything—"

"Sure, Jonathan interrupted, bringing a halt to the argument. "No problem."

"Thanks, kid. I owe you one." Hopper removed his hat from the wall-mounted coat rack and swung the door open. "After you," he said to Joyce with a smile.

Obviously hesitant to leave six kids up to the hands of her eldest son and Nancy, she reluctantly stepped through the doorway. "Will, do what your brother tells you. That goes for all of you kids, hear? We'll be back soon."

Just before he followed Joyce out he poked his head back inside and said, "None of you're going to run off with my daughter, are you?"

Confused and uncertain of whether or not he was being serious, the Party shook their heads, one after another. Mike was the first to do so, most likely due to Hopper's steely gaze landing on him first.

"Good." He looked over at El. "Promise me you'll stay put, no matter what they say?"

"Yes." There was only a slight hesitation, which Hopper took to be a good sign.

"Best news I've heard all day. We'll be back soon. TV remote's in the coffee table drawer, eggnog's in the fridge. Knock yourselves out." And with that, he shut the door and trudged over to the truck.

It was a rather quiet drive over to the cabin, either because it was freezing, despite the truck's heater running at full blast, or because it

felt rather awkward driving out to Hopper's cabin, through a suspiciously-romantic, snow-filled forest, in the middle of Christmas night. Hopper couldn't help but feel apprehensive about his decision, specifically because it almost felt like a date. Of course, that wouldn't really become an issue once she opened his gift, but it was still utterly nerve-wracking. It was pleasant, though. The scenery felt mystical, and the winter wildlife was everywhere. They saw elk, rabbits, squirrels, wolves, even an owl and possibly a bear, though they couldn't be sure, it was so far off.

It seemed to take forever, but they finally arrived at the cabin, which looked even more rundown in the snow and darkness. Apparently a light had been left on inside, and it made one of the windows shine a bright yellow, oddly picturesque. "This is where you keep Jane?" Joyce's tone was unreadable.

"Yeah." He drew out the word, nervous over what her next words might be and assuming the worst. But he certainly hadn't expected a short laugh.

"It's gorgeous! It looks just like the one my great-grandmother used to live in while she was in Oregon. It almost doesn't look real. In a good way," she quickly clarified.

Hopper snorted. "Gorgeous. Probably not the word I'd use for the outside of this place. I'll admit the interior looks much better than this, though."

Mock-impatiently, Joyce heaved the front passenger door open, pretended to whine, "Let's go already, then!," and staggered through the snow to the front porch, leaving deep footprints. Hopper held back a laugh and followed suit.

When he finally found the right key and swung the door open, Joyce was entranced by the little home. "It's so cozy," she kept repeating. "And that's her bedroom? Oh, those lights are perfect up there. Jane's such a lucky girl, to have a father like you."

"Not exactly the way she would word it," he said with smirk. "I like the way you say it more. And I don't mind if you tell her I said that."

"Stop that. That little girl thinks the world of you. Now I hate to put a damper on our little escape, but we *have* been gone for almost a half-hour. Not because someone took his sweet time driving or anything."

Hopper blushed, and he turned even redder when he realized he was doing so. Fortunately, Joyce didn't notice his cherry-red face; she was too busy admiring the kitchen curtains. "Gotta be careful in the snow. Even with the chains you can still lose control if you go too fast—" Suddenly Hopper realized he had no idea where Joyce's gift actually was. The last time he'd seen it was the night he'd brought it back from the trailer, and he'd fallen asleep with it in his arms. As he thought about it, he didn't recall awakening with it in the same place. Had it fallen between the couch cushions? Had he been sleepwalking, and he'd moved the box then? Heck, had he dreamed the entire process of finding it at the trailer and—

"Is this it, here?"

Hopper rotated sharply, and there it was, resting on the table. It lay just underneath the overhead lamp, which made the box take on a slight heavenly aura. "Surprise!" he said weakly, tossing a false grin on his face. "Open it up." That would've been fatally shameful if he'd had to tell her he hadn't the slightest clue where he'd left it. Actually, how had it gotten there? It hadn't been there during breakfast, he knew that for a fact. And he'd used that very table to stock the dishes of food he had brought to the trailer only hours ago. Hopper didn't believe in miracles, but in this instance . . .

"Oh, Jim Hopper!" Inside the box was a thin, silver-chain necklace, extraordinarily light and clearly expensive. Now Joyce's eyes grew watery, and she fanned her face with her hand. "There's no way . . . no way I could accept this. It's so beautiful . . . How dare you spend so much on something for me!" Her sentence was broken up by sniffles, for her nose was running as fast as her emotions were.

"Well, I, uh . . . didn't pay for it. I got it from someone." *Wow, that was romantic.*

"Oh. Uh—I-I see." Joyce frowned, the sentimental value of the necklace decreasing significantly.

Hopper hurried to amend the situation, for there was much more to the gift than initially implied. "There's a story behind that, you know. If you'd, uh, care to hear it." Joyce nodded, blowing her nose. With that, Hopper took a deep breath and began, hesitant at first, but quickly gaining confidence. "Back in my New York days, maybe two weeks after my divorce, I told my boss, Chief Gary Duggan, who was a close friend of mine, that I was putting in my two weeks' notice. He asked me if it was because I'd lost my little girl and my wife. I told him they were all I'd had, and I couldn't function in the city that had once belonged to them. I knew I was going to move, so I quit. He seemed pretty upset by it, but I just couldn't continue my normal life when it was far from being normal.

"On my last day, he called me up to his office, and he gave me that necklace. He told me he knew I'd find someone else again someday, and when I did, when I met the right woman . . . I was supposed to give her the necklace. It was supposed to remind me that there was still hope for me. And now, four years later . . . it only feels right to give it to you, Joyce."

Brief, yes, and lacking many details, but the basics were out on the table, and they seemed to have made a favorable impression. Joyce was opening and closing her mouth and gasping like a fish out of water. "Hopper—" was all she finally managed to speak before falling into a deep embrace, and that was how they remained for a long, blissful moment.

The two finally arrived back at Hopper's trailer, and they were surprised by how quiet it seemed. The radio wasn't loud enough to be heard from outside anymore, and only light visible was from the dim kitchen light. Hopper unlocked the door and eased it open, where he found just a picture-perfect moment. The television was quietly playing A Christmas Carol, but it was being widely ignored by the trailer's occupants. Dustin sat in the red armchair next to the fireplace, half asleep and awakening every time his head dropped. The couch housed Lucas and Max, who noticed the subtle creak of the door and waved at the new arrivals. And just to their right, on the opposite side of the couch, sat Mike, and a sleeping El, all wrapped up in her newly-favorite wool blanket. She had her head

resting on Mike's shoulder, and the boy, while not asleep, stared unfocused at the TV with glassy eyes.

Will was asleep on the bed in the spare bedroom, and Jonathan and Nancy were sitting on the bench just beside the door and chatting quietly. They quickly stood and greeted the two adults when they made themselves known. "Have a good time?" Jonathan sleepily asked, trying and failing to keep a casual tone.

Joyce could only nod. It was beyond good. It had been a life-changing experience for both of them, and neither wanted to part from the other.

"They could stay overnight. Then you wouldn't have to walk home in the dark," Hopper had offered during the drive back. "It wouldn't be any trouble." Aside from feeding them all breakfast with a single box of Eggs and the remaining eggnog, but that wasn't important.

"I wish we could, I'm not looking forward to the walk back. But I told those kids' parents I'd have them back at 12:30, and that's in almost thirty minutes."

"Feel free to use my phone to call 'em up and let 'em know about any changing plans." Hopper hoped to death he wasn't sounding too desperate.

Joyce laughed, a good sign. "I wish we could, Hop! I've got work in the morning, though, and I'll need my car and uniform. I have to go home. I'm sorry, really."

So they'd decided to have their first date on New Year's Eve, and it would end after the New Year countdown. So they could start the year off right, Hopper had joked.

While Joyce roused Will, Hopper asked Lucas to get up his other two friends. Dustin immediately leaned forward in the chair, peering blearily across the arm. "No, no, I'm awake," he mumbled loudly, and he fell to the floor and snored. It took every inch of Hopper to not vocalize the bark of laughter welling up in his throat, but he somehow succeeded.

The stifled commotion had fully aroused Mike, and it was then he noticed El, who was still fast asleep against his shoulder, and smiled. Hopper knew it had been some of the best few hours the boy had had in over a year, for that day had been the first time he and El were together and not having to worry about being seen or killed. Kind of like how he'd felt earlier with Joyce, he realized. Mike was good for El, and she was good for Mike, and he knew that they had to keep in some kind of contact. Maybe he could teach Mike Morse Code, or get El a walkie-talkie, but considering how moody both of the kids became when deprived of each other, it would be essential for them to talk—sometimes.

Knowing how light of a sleeper El was, he was quite surprised that she hadn't awoken yet on her own. Maybe she just felt safe enough with her friends around that she didn't have to snap back from dreamland at every little noise. She didn't even stir when Hopper gently raised her head, allowing Mike to reluctantly get up, and laid her down across the sofa. It was like a movie scene, really. El asleep on the couch, curled up and cozy, and Mike was just . . . taking it all in. He gazed at her like he wanted to memorize every bit of the moment.

Hopper set his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Don't kiss her. Please."

Mike went completely still and shook his head quickly, his face burning.

"Appreciate it." He gave the boy a pat on the shoulder and went to gather the remaining snacks from the counter, leaving Mike in an extraordinarily uncomfortable situation.

Soon everyone was all bundled up and ready to head out. Hopper had offered to drive them part of the way, but Joyce had reminded him that they wouldn't all fit, even if the backseat was free of fast food bags, empty beverage cans, and other garbage. No one seemed to be in a rush to leave, even Joyce, who had to be up in six hours. But when all of the final conversations trailed off, they knew it was time. Almost remorsefully, they began their trek home in the snow, wishing they'd heeded their mothers' advice and worn extra material underneath their jackets and sweaters. Joyce went first, followed by Will, who was supporting Dustin as well as he could, Lucas, Max,

Jonathan and Nancy, and lastly, Mike. The boy cast a final look in El's direction and turned to Hopper. "Tell her I said Merry Christmas," Hopper said he would, and he made to exit the trailer, but was stopped by a familiar voice.

"Mike?" By some cliché Christmas miracle, El's eyes fluttered open and she sat up, surprised to see the empty trailer. "You're going?"

Mike nodded, a massive smile spreading across his face. "Home. Yeah. But I'll call you—uh, m-maybe, if the Chief says it's okay . . .?" He glanced up at Hopper, who, after a moment of thought, nodded slowly.

"I'll work something out."

Both kids cheered, causing Hopper to chortle. El stood up and approached the two males, a tired gleam in her eye. "Merry Christmas, Mike," she said softly, and she wrapped her arms around his torso, snuggling up close enough to hear his pounding heartbeat. He was startled at first, but he followed suit, creating an incredibly heartwarming scene.

Hopper rolled his eyes, but he knew what had to be done. He waited until Mike opened his eyes again, and after catching his gaze he mouthed, "Kiss her."

Without skipping a beat, Mike pulled back from El, looked deep into her loving eyes, and kissed her.

Hopper couldn't decide if he felt more uncomfortable watching them or looking up at the ceiling until they broke apart, and he was just stepping out onto the porch when he ran into Joyce, who was hurrying up the steps and wearing a look of impatience. "Where's Mike?" she asked, kicking the snow off of her boots. The moment her heart melted at the sight of the young couple's special moment was quite clear, judging by her puppy eyes and clasped hands, not to mention her quiet squeal that made her sound like a schoolgirl. "Oh, Hop!" she whispered, and she leaned into his side while she took in the full moment. When El and Mike finally took a breath and said their goodbyes, Joyce turned to give Hopper a contemplative once-over.

"Yeah?" he asked, slightly confused. Hopefully it wouldn't be parenting advice on how to accommodate a daughter's love for a boy, or something of the like.

Joyce smiled up at him. "Nothing, it's just . . . I forgot to give you something." And before Hopper could ask what, she got up on her tiptoes, pulled his head down, and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

He knew his expression was probably ridiculous, but he didn't know what to do with himself right in that moment. It was magical, as cliché as it sounded, and he finally understood what it was like for Mike and his daughter.

Mike finally stepped through the door, completely unaware of the replicated event that had just occurred, and followed Joyce out into the perfect layer of snow surrounding the trailer. Hopper started when something tickled his hand, but he relaxed when he found it was El, slipping her hand into his own.

"Merry Christmas!" came a chorus of voices from the edge of the forest.

"Merry Christmas!" he and El called back. And there they stood, wondering how they'd come across such a delightful Christmas.

Author's Note

AAWWWWWW! That ending just gave me chills, lemme tell you. I could see it all in my head, and I hope that I described it well enough for you all to see it, too. Also, my kind of style for lovey-dovey moments is basically go minimalist, and allow the readers (you!) to read the characters' emotions and let the magic happen in your own minds. Several years back I found a FanFiction author who used the same method, and I found it fit very well, especially since he'd done a very good job at developing his characters. So yeah, that's that story. Also, that little El-asleep-with-her-head-on-Mike's-shoulder thing? The Office reference! (You know, during that one conference meeting when *SPOILER*** Jim and Pam are just friends, and Pam falls asleep with her head resting on Jim's shoulder? I thought it fit in here.)**

Few other things I want to say, but don't want to waste your time with the details:

* Larry Eyler was a real serial killer in the early 1980's who did commit some of his murders in Indiana. I do my research.

* That story about the necklace Hopper gives to Joyce? Based off a true story. My Criminal Justice professor told me about it, and it immediately made me think of Hopper and Joyce. Sorry if it wasn't implemented very well, I struggled a bit there.

* I love Dustin.

* I love Mike/El

* I love Hopper/El [PLATONIC SHIP]

This story had been such an exciting adventure, I'm not going to lie. I hadn't expected these beautiful characters, this strange and unique setting to grow on me as much as it did, and it was such a special treat to write this Christmas special! It's hard to believe it's all finally coming to a close, but you needn't worry. This is only a temporary ending, and I plan to write more Stranger Things goodness later on! It was especially interesting writing about Hopper's background, and that may be something I'll explore in a future story. I have a few ideas, and I'd love to hear any you all may have! PM me, leave them in the reviews section, I'll find 'em. Thank you so much for following this story, it means a whole lot to me! This is by far the most popular story I've written, with 17 follows, 10 favorites, 6 reviews, and 1,000 views! I'm so thankful for each and every one of you, you really made my year! I look forward to further engaging in this fanbase, and I can't wait to see what stories 2018 holds! I'll see you all soon, and have a great New Year's!